The Lesbian Review of Books

An International Quarterly Review of Books By, For, and About Lesbians.

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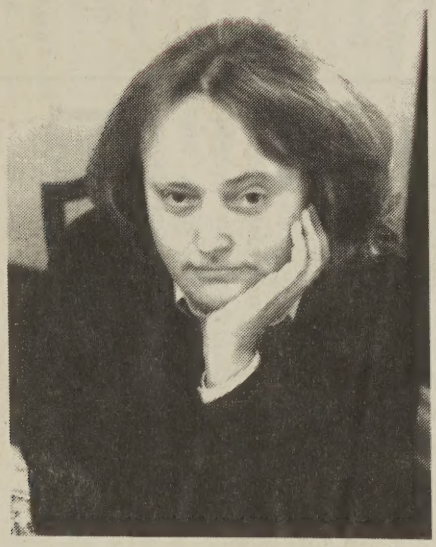

photo: Kathleen Kroger

Ellen Hart's newest Jane Lawless mystery, **Wicked Games**, blends love and murder. Reviewed by Melissa Hartman, p. 18.

"There are no lesbians in the American Basketball League." This is the official word, but we don't believe a word of it. Akilah Monifa shows how Sara Gogol's new book, **Playing in a New League: The Women of the American Basketball League's First Season** sidesteps the issue of sexual orientation--when it can't cover it up.

- The latest book on lesbian health explores all the issues about lesbian bodies--except reproductive ones. Rachel Rose reviews **Gateways to Improving Lesbian Health and Health Care: Opening Doors** edited by Christy M. Ponticelli; see p. 5.

- Ruthann Robson looks at how a lesbian perspective might change the teaching and practice of law, in **Sappho Goes to Law School**, reviewed by Akilah Monifa, p. 10.

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. . . and more!

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Don't Think I'm Not a Nice Girl

by Alix Lindsey Olson

so we've learned karate, carry knives on our runs
wield words like weapons, prepare glares--hidden guns
we've deconstructed demystified
tried retribution remythologized
we've been diagnosed with your diseases,
and still tried pleases tried tears tried Jesus
you wanna see what it's like down here,
in this pool of someone else's rules well
jump in, take a swim or just sit in this pit
squashing bare toes in someone else's bullshit
we do it all the time.
still we've tried being patient, collected, calm, nice,
trying praying, tried laying you, paying the price
we've learned to scream until our throats throbbed
what else do you do while your cunt's being robbed
and they say you've made progress girls, take a rest in between
see while you're resting, someone else is progressing,
it's what i've seen
so i take back the whispers, the cute mute act
and the high pitched giggles, yeah i take them back
i won't avoid your stare, evade your step,
nothing of that kind, won't
victimize the only space that's mine.
see now i'd put my life on the line just to see them trip
frown and say funny love I never saw you slip.
i say my rife on the line you say 'man, she's jaded'
and i say maybe control's overrated
like when we cackled, they called us witches
now we don't giggle they call us bitches
well i'm cacklin loud taking it back,
full of hiss, cacklin proud now
and they're getting nervous with this kissing each other
scratching their heads, what's going on brother
and they yell feed your husband stop feeding the fire
and we just cackle, we're a fuckin witches' choir
and we sing sharpen your knives, sharpen your daughters
steam up the mirrors, bake up some dreams,
cook us some riots, fry up some screams,
and when you're sick of your
skirts slice open the seams
cause they want domestics, they'll give us needle and thread
for patching their egos. we'll sow revolution instead.
and i see you saying subtle, sister, less bite more bark
you can make your point without leaving such a mark.
subtle, sister, stop your seething,
i think we got it, i think we're even.
subtle like a penis pounding its target?
subtle like your hissing from across the street?
subtle like the binding on my sisters' feet?
subtle like her belly raped with his semen,
draped in his fuck, funny. doesn't SEEM even
well, sometimes anger's subtle, stocked in metaphor
full of finesse dressed in allure
and sometimes anger's subtle, less rage than sad
leaking slow through spigots you didn't know you had
but sometimes it's just fuck you, fuck you
you see, and to me, that's poetry too.
cause this is not a call to arms, or a plea for liberation
or attention to protocol. This is preservation.

***Alix Lindsey Olson** is a writer and actor living in New York City. She is a 1997 graduate of Wesleyan University, where she was a frequent contributor to **Iahu**, the women's poetry publication. In New York, she performs poetry readings at various venues, including the WOW (women of the world) Cafe, the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, and Solo Arts Group.*

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Queerdom in the African Diaspora

by Janet Wallace

Má-ka: Diasporic Juks, Contemporary Writing by Queers of African Descent ed. by Debbie Douglas, Courtnay McFarlane, Makeda Silvera, and Douglas Stewart. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1997, 212 pp., $17.95 U.S., $19.95 Can. ISBN 1-896705-14-6.

The audience for the anthology **Má-ka: Diasporic Juks** is Black lesbians and gay men, and people who want to find out about what some of us think.

The words that make up the name of the book are taken from Jamaican slang. *Má-ka* is a prickly plant, and *juks* is what the plant does to you with its thorns when you touch them. If you surmise from this title that the stories inside will prick you, will make you stop and think, you will not be disappointed.

> Each member of the audience would benefit from reading **Má-ka** on her own, but this book would also be good to read with a study group.

The writers are from diverse backgrounds, many from outside the United States. The editors describe themselves in the introduction as "island-born folk, . . . four queers of African descent now living in Canada." Although the title and the editors' introduction hint at a book written by people of the African diaspora, and not necessarily from the United States, U.S. writers are represented in significant numbers. Of all the writers who identified their origins in the biographies, one third were from the U.S. Nevertheless, the book expands our world. The scope of the anthology is international and not at all slanted toward the U.S. The stories show us how the struggles African American queers endure—our right to exist, for example—are shared by Black people in other countries. It's difficult to say whether it's fortunate or unfortunate that other Black people share our peculiar problems; but it does make the isolation seem less grinding.

For example, constitutional legality in South Africa aside, acceptance of queers is still a long time coming, as an interview with a lesbian living in the South African province of Transkei shows. An interesting comparison is that the secrecy with which she had to look for just one other person like herself and the closeted men she found herself hanging out with could easily have been the story of a number of African American women coming out 30 years ago.

The theme of the anthology, if there could be just one to cover this collection of writings, is of speaking up for oneself. Speak up. Tell the truth. Say the hard stuff. Let it out. Two frankly sexual stories do just that. They let it out. One story called "RahRah," by "Just 'W"' could have been a dream, a trance journey, or just a wild time someone had. The story was short, like a journal entry, and promised much in its male eroticism. The author could have said more, but like the journal of a busy person, this entry only gave the juiciest highlights.

Another piece, "Sadomasochism: A Work in Progress" by Deanna Bowen, was erotic or irritating, depending on your point of view, but never tentative or detached. The S/M theme was further explored in T. J. Bryan's "Melting My Iron Maiden." This was a rumination on a woman's quest for sexually submissive experience and how that quest is intertwined with her sense of self as "a Blk, 30-year-old dominant sista."

"I, Moffi," the story of a South African man living in Canada who goes home to visit his mother and revisit old haunts, was another riveting tale. Not because of the action—written like a travelogue, the story was relatively slow moving—but because of the glimpse of What It's Like to be a gay man in South Africa. Those of us born and raised and still living in the United States don't have much of a clue of What It's Like. We can imagine, but we can never really know. The author, Norman Kester, identified himself as being "born to a coloured family in Kimberly, South Africa" in his biography. The main character in his story is also colored. Although the writing makes it evident that "coloured" is different from "black," the extent of that difference is not apparent from either the biography or the piece he wrote. For readers to fully appreciate the story and the main character's situations, it would have been helpful to state the importance of being "coloured" as opposed to Black.

Poetry appears throughout the book, and some of it is very powerful. However, none of it elicited the same thrill as when I first read Hattie Gossett or Chrystos in the anthology **This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color**. Nor did the poetry have the eloquence and economy of words as the writings of the late Essex Hemphill in the anthology of Black gay male writers, **In the Life**. Of course, these books were published (and first read) over 15 years ago, so it is through the veil of time that I remember my reactions. But that remembrance brings up another observation: the youth of the writers. It is not possible to state with a degree of certainty how old many of the contributors are, but much of their work reflects the ideas of the younger crowd, you know, the ones that prefer saying "queer" instead of "gayanlesbian." These stories are about people living with parents who don't know they are gay, divagirls who dress up in wigs and false eyelashes (female drag queens?) and worship Phylis Hyman, young men who seek relationships to help define themselves as men with healthy Black consciousness. Cheryl Clarke's lecture on Audre Lorde's work is the obvious exception.

Each member of the audience would benefit from reading **Má-ka** on her own, but this book would also be good to read with a study group. The diversity of writing would be enough to keep the discussions lively.

A small suggestion for improvement would be to have some of the stories be longer, more fleshed out. "Being In A Relationship Is Like Being Pregnant" is the piece that comes immediately to mind. ❖❖❖

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A Critical Look at Grassroots Strategies for Overcoming Heterosexism

by Andrea Austen

Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work ed. by James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 442 pp., $49.50 cloth, ISBN 0-231-10422-7; $18.50 paper, ISBN 10231010423-5.

How can equality for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals be promoted? The editors and contributors of **Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work** express a deep and abiding skepticism about the prospect and promise of "top-down" political change. "It can be argued that a major mistake made by the various civil rights movements since the 1960s has been the overwhelming focus on government as the leading agent of change rather than on grassroots organizations and individuals trying to change social and economic institutions from within" (Walter L. Williams, 82-83). The fiasco over gays in the military and, more recently, the furor over same-sex marriage culminating with the Defense of Marriage Act suggest that there are limits to a "top-down" conception of political change. Given the failures of this approach, the editors and contributors of this book set out to showcase the value and power of a "bottom-up" approach to redressing heterosexism and homophobia.

Working in the trenches with corporations, religious and cultural groups, students (from high school to college, including those pursuing professional degrees in medicine, social work, and law enforcement), psychologists, elementary school teachers, and others, the contributors describe their own efforts and experiences in attempting to ameliorate heterosexism and homophobia at the local level. These experiences are highly diverse, but for many authors this amounts to writing about their experiences designing, implementing, or extending "sensitivity training workshops," or courses designed to alter heterosexist attitudes by exposing and refuting the prejudicial ideas that prevent lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals from being treated fairly.

Toward that end, the volume includes some thirty-two articles (plus an introduction) written by over forty authors. The book is divided into five sections beginning with one on "Foundational Issues" followed by four on a "Working With" theme (Working With "Ethnic Groups and Family Members," "Students," "Professional Training Programs," and "Institutions"). With the exception of the series of "Foundational Issues" papers, the information and analysis provided and the experiences described are so context-specific and so closely tailored to the intended audience that it is difficult to imagine who the editors had in mind as readers of this book. Setting aside those with a passing interest in the intricacies of grassroots politics, **Overcoming Heterosexism** would likely be a useful resource text for those seeking to design a sensitivity training workshop in a very specific occupational, religious, or cultural setting.

Its limited audience notwithstanding, the book as a whole makes some bold assumptions about the nature and etymology of heterosexism and homophobia, and many of the authors express a heartfelt conviction that anti-lesbian and anti-gay attitudes can be rehabilitated in the context of a highly structured seminar. Testimonials on the part of course coordinators (i.e., contributors) range from the modest—"something positive happened" (Diane DuBose Brunner, 180)—to the downright self-congratulatory—"it provided opportunities for students to affirm lesbian and gay rights and thereby assert a libertarian identity of freedom of expression and equal rights for all" (Paul van de Ven, 225).

I accept the basic intuition that the "top-down" approach poses serious limitations to the advancement of lesbian and gay rights and agree that grassroots work is necessary and beneficial, but there is reason to be skeptical of the idea that sensitivity training modules are the best means to achieve political progress at the local level. Although George M. Fredrickson said the following about racism, it may be just as relevant to heterosexism and homophobia. He writes:

> The notion that [homophobic prejudice] and its effects on [lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals] can be significantly reduced by cleverly designed diversity classes and similar measures is doubtful on several grounds. . . . [M]any [heterosexuals] instinctively feel that a social order that gives power and precedence over [homosexuals] is normal and natural. . . . [T]he rewards of caste superiority are so central to the self-esteem of many [heterosexuals] that they would be unwilling to surrender them no matter how strong the evidence that [lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals] are unfairly treated. Power and privilege are like valued material possessions; people do not readily give them up even if they cannot justify them on rational grounds.[1]

Perhaps the most we can expect of "sensitivity training" exercises is that by outlining what is and what is not acceptable within the auspices of corporate or institutional nondiscrimination policies, some uncertainty may be alleviated on the part of some persons. To expect more than this would amount to proselytizing, with its attendant problems of condescension and manipulation. If one tries to alleviate these problems with voluntary attendance, then a second problem arises—those who attend most likely need it least.

Another reason to be skeptical of the kinds of sensitivity training courses described and advocated as an appropriate means of grassroots political change in **Overcoming Heterosexism** is its concomitant endorsement of psychological tests in the context of such courses. We are told that the "Modified Attitudes Toward Homosexuality" test, the "Index of Homophobia," the "Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men" (or ATLGM), and a host of other models, measures, and instruments will "assess subjects' attitudes towards homosexuality or their feelings toward lesbians and gay men" (18). Paul van de Ven, for instance, in his paper, "Promoting Respect for

Different Viewpoints and Ways of Living to Australian High School Students," describes how he begins his course by asking students to complete a handout (anonymously) by marking "true," "false," or "don't know" to statements such as: "Most gay and lesbian people would change if they could," "If you have a homosexual experience it means that you are gay or lesbian," and "Lesbians and gay men rarely force their sexuality on others." These tests are "collected, retained, and later collated by the teacher for later use" (221).

Much to the chagrin of some psychologists, you cannot gain access to the minds of individuals by having them complete pencil-and-paper tests (even anonymously). Test-takers, realizing that researchers are trying to gain access to their minds, may respond by refusing access. People are infinitely more complex and intelligent than the authors of these tests might suppose.

Also problematic is the widespread endorsement on the part of the contributors of the (by now commonplace) idea that heterosexism and homophobia can be significantly reduced by individuals "coming out," presumably in as many contexts as possible. For instance, Dee Bridgewater, in her paper, "Effective Coming Out: Self-Disclosure Strategies to Reduce Sexual Identity Bias," states that its goal is to "advocate coming out as a prime method for reducing negative attitudes and acts of prejudice against sexual identity minorities" (65) and that studies indicate "that individuals with personal knowledge of at least one gay person were more favorable in their attitudes than those who knew no openly gay person" (66). Yet people of color are "out" all of the time and racism hasn't been eliminated. Perhaps the author has in mind more than visibility. Perhaps she has in mind extended personal contact in an ongoing relationship—a kind of engaged visibility. But again this does not appear to be the case with sexism. Women are "out" all of the time and many sexist men have close relationships with them, yet those men continue to be sexist. There are many good reasons to come out, but we shouldn't overestimate its ability to reduce discrimination.

There is a role for grassroots organizing in the contemporary struggle for lesbian and gay rights, but precisely what we can do to combat heterosexism and homophobia in our own communities and workplaces deserves much more thoughtful consideration. In the meantime, we should be wary of the lure of "sensitivity training" workshops and courses, the effectiveness of which is questionable. ❖❖❖

NOTES:

[1]See "America's Caste System: Will It Change?" **The New York Review**, October 23, 1997, 73.

__Andrea Austen__ is writing a doctoral thesis on social justice and sexual orientation in the Department of Philosophy at York University, Toronto.

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Grappling With Injustice

by Beverly Burch

Women's Growth in Diversity: More Writings From the Stone Center ed. by Judith Jordan. New York: Guilford Press, 1997, 342 pp., U.S. $18.95 paper, ISBN 1-57230-206-2. $40.00 cloth, ISBN 1-57230-205-4.

The women at the Stone Center in Wellesley, MA, have been important voices in feminist therapy for more than 20 years, beginning with Jean Baker Miller's germinal **Toward a New Psychology of Women** in 1976. Throughout the '80s they published a series of "works-in-progress," papers articulating their ideas about women's development and the practice of psychotherapy, some of which were gathered together in their first book, **Women's Growth in Connection**, in 1991. Many feminist therapists have been influenced by this book and its primary tenet—that at best, women's psychological and emotional development occurs within relationships, that women mature in the context of relationship, not separateness and autonomy, as mainstream psychoanalytic theory had once argued. The fundamental (and constantly repeated) keystone to health and growth for women is mutuality in relationship, including, of course, the therapy relationship. And disconnection is the "source of most human suffering" (3).

As widely embraced as their work was, however, it was also criticized for relying upon the ideas and experiences of middle-class white therapists and clients. Their work was grounded not in women's experience but in the experience of a particular group of women, a failing shared by other feminist theorists and certainly by most other psychological theorists. This new book from the Stone Center begins to address the deficiencies of the old. Some of the authors are working with other populations, particularly African American women and lesbians, and they envision a psychology informed by this diversity. As Jordan writes in the introduction:

> While all women suffer in a patriarchal society where our experience is not represented in the dominant discourse, women in various cultural/ethnic groups suffer additional marginalization based on race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic standing, able-bodiedness, and age. Women who are marginalized also develop strengths that may differ from those of white, privileged heterosexual women. (2-3)

Clevonne Turner writes about the disconnections created by racism, both across color lines and within them. As an example, she notes that African American mothers may tend to be stricter with their children because the consequences of unacceptable behavior for them can be graver. As mothers try "to both protect and teach," tension is created between mothers and daughters:

> Some of these mothers have been mislabeled as matriarchal, dominating, overly intrusive, and hysterical. Some of the daughters then are labeled as aggressive, hostile, argumentative, and controlling when they each try to juggle their roles and expectations. (78)

Just as women often have been viewed as dependent, regressive, or deficient for their deep investment in relationship rather than autonomy, Black families have been judged by norms more valued in white male psychology. Turner writes movingly of the stresses on family connections as each generation tries to overcome barriers imposed by racism.

Another consequence of racism for Black women is self-hatred, an issue Turner suggests must often be addressed by psychotherapists. The complexities of raising this issue and being able to handle it skillfully if the client is African American and the therapist is not, especially if the therapist is white, are not addressed in this book. Can there be sufficient trust, sufficient understanding to do this most delicate kind of exploration and healing in such a therapy partnership? Can therapy be considered successful if it doesn't happen? Therapists of all races need to be addressing this topic, as it bears so profoundly on the possibilities for mutuality between therapist and client.

When both the client and the therapist are lesbian, Susan Slater writes, a different twist on the nature of mutuality occurs:

> I will suggest that the therapy relationship is intangibly influenced by both clients' and therapists' associations with each woman's experiences in her lesbian lover relationships. This underlying nuance—or reminiscence—may be wholly or partly unconscious and ties the primary elements of the lover bond to some aspects of the structure of the therapy relationship. (120)

This particular unconscious layering of the therapy relationship has not been articulated before, but I believe Slater is correct that it is quite common. I welcomed her observation for another reason as well—it is one of the few acknowledgments in the book of unconscious experience in relationship and of the symbolic realm in psychotherapy.

Slater draws a parallel between lesbians' desire to preserve their ties with ex-lovers after a breakup and clients' frequent wish to continue some kind of relationship with their therapist after the work is over. Heterosexual women often feel the same wish and have an equally hard struggle accepting the limits of therapy relationships and not feeling rejected within them. Nevertheless, in naming this evocation of special intimacy, Slater is observing an important aspect of therapy between lesbians. She offers examples from her own work that include the experience of sexual tensions in psychotherapy. Little has been written about the subjective experiences of therapists vis-à-vis sexual feelings in therapy, particularly for lesbians, and Slater's contributions are welcome.

The evocation of lover relationships within psychotherapy relationships is important and powerful, but it is not universal, even for lesbians, and Slater may have overstated her case a bit in generalizing this particularly intense bond to therapy between lesbians as a general rule. From the therapist's point of view, how would one engage so deeply and manage so complex a tie with twenty or thirty different women every week? I believe the evocation of lover relationships in therapy also occurs in a different form with heterosexual women and goes largely unacknowledged. Slater recognizes that the experiences of lesbians in therapy are not always unique but that their relational focus may illuminate similar issues for other women:

> [L]esbian experience also informs clients' and therapists' approaches to managing the dichotomy of sharing great closeness behind closed doors yet hiding the relationship from others, of juggling complex realities related to their therapist-client contact after termination, and of recognizing the potential for sexual feeling inherent in the developing emotional connection. While nonlesbian therapy dyads may also achieve these relationship qualities . . . lesbian experience . . . offers a particular contribution to the wider discussion of therapeutic mutuality between women. (126)

Natalie Eldridge and Julie Mencher, two other members of the Lesbian Theory Group, discuss dilemmas of psychotherapy practice using the language of the Stone Center. Ethics of therapy practice and the inherent asymmetry of the therapy relationship are most meaningfully explored within a context where mutuality is esteemed. Eldridge and Mencher's work tends to raise questions rather than answer them as they try to sort out the difficulty of recognizing and employing the unequal power of the therapist while holding onto a deeper recognition of the fundamental equality of both participants. This is an intriguing and challenging paradox, and the risk is to create a simplistic equation between power inequities and injustice. All relationships have power inequities—many of them structured in, those between the young and the old or parents and children inescapable—and each of us inevitably finds ourselves on both sides of

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these equations in different relationships. Their effort to articulate a place for mutuality within power inequities is important to this ongoing communal dialogue.

Eldridge and Mencher's paper also reflects the contributions of others outside of Stone Center influence, particularly intersubjective theories within the psychoanalytic community. Stone Center writers have often been faulted for not giving much recognition to other thinkers, both feminist and psychoanalytic, in their work and seemingly presenting themselves as a closed system. The lesbian writers and the African American writers in this volume each bring in the work of others from their respective intellectual communities.

Women's Growth in Diversity also addresses other issues important to diverse populations. Beverly Daniel Tatum integrates racial identity development theory with relational theory, drawing from experiences of Black women who live, work, or go to school in largely white communities. Wendy Rosen explores the complexities of lesbians coming out to their mothers and how this issue may reverberate with mothers' own experience of their sexuality. Clevonne Turner discusses career dilemmas for Black women—the barriers encountered at work and the methods Black women use to nurture themselves and cope with these barriers—providing another important resource for all women who need to learn more about African American experience. Julie Mencher revisits the question of merger as a relational dynamic in lesbian relationships, noting again that lesbians may desire and flourish within relationships that may appear merged to others. And Cynthia Garcia Coll, Robin Cook-Nobles, and Janet Surrey offer a very personal collaboration on making connections across lines of racial and ethnic difference.

Other topics not so much related to diversity are also explored. Stephen Bergman and Janet Surrey address heterosexual relationships. Irene Stiver and Jean Baker Miller offer a useful exploration of the role of sadness within and separate from depression. Judith Jordan writes about the power of shame in silencing women. Sexual expression, anger, and therapeutic impasses are each given a chapter in the book. All of these papers make useful contributions to feminist therapy.

The least useful parts of the book are those concerned exclusively with Stone Center theory and process. They intend to address critiques of their work by others but instead continue the tendency of some Stone Center writers to ignore the contributions of others and to seem to have invented notions of relational therapy and mutuality on their own.

Nevertheless, there is much to applaud in this book. It represents a significant effort within the psychotherapeutic community to grapple seriously with social prejudices and injustices and the ways they are ignored or even perpetuated in therapy. ❖❖❖

***Beverly Burch** is a writer and a therapist in private practice in Oakland, CA. She is the author of **On Intimate Terms: The Psychology of Difference in Lesbian Relationships** (University of Illinois Press) and **Other Women: Lesbian/Bisexual Experience and Psychoanalytic Views of Women** (Columbia University Press). Her poetry has appeared in a number of journals, most recently in **Many Mountains Moving**.*

Getting Cured

by Rachel Rose

Gateways to Improving Lesbian Health and Health Care: Opening Doors ed. by Christy M. Ponticelli. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998, 114 pp., U.S. $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-56023-103-3.

Visiting the doctor is all too often a dreaded and dreadful experience for lesbians: There we are, half-naked, legs in stirrups, as a new doctor rummages around inside us, and we wonder how we can tell her we are lesbian, wonder if we even need the pap smear she is intent on taking. Or our doctor asks us what form of birth control we use, and he won't take "none" for an answer. Or we go to visit our partner in hospital after her first chemo treatment and are referred to as her "buddy" and asked to come back later. The list is endless, but ask any lesbian, and chances are she can offer a horror story about homophobia experienced at the hands of health care providers.

Christy M. Ponticelli's **Gateways** is a collection of essays by ten different authors about lesbian experiences of the health care system. Each study addresses the particular health care needs of diverse groups of lesbians. Ponticelli and the researchers in **Gateways** have taken special care that the experiences of lesbians of color are central to all topics researched, and women of color make up the majority of participants in several studies. Ponticelli is to be applauded for making sure that lesbians of color are intrinsic to all levels of research on lesbian health care reported in this volume. Too often, lesbians of color are marginalized, ignored, or relegated to a footnote at the end of a study.

Without exception, the studies in **Gateways** rely extensively on the direct experience and life stories of lesbian research participants. This extensive "witnessing" of lesbian experience is an immeasurable gift to health care providers, especially non-lesbian caregivers committed to understanding lesbian health needs. As author Joanne M. Hall emphasizes in her study of lesbian survivors of sexual abuse, no academic explanation can replace the educational value of authentic lesbian narratives. Hall notes that "[w]hat is missing from amassed quantitative data in the abuse literature is a well-articulated experiential perspective on surviving childhood sexual abuse from survivors' points of view" (9).

Hall encouraged women survivors in her study to tell their own stories. She makes these narratives the foundation for her own and the starting point for further research. Without exception and despite horrific suffering, lesbian survivors in her study all minimized their abuse and its effects. "Vanessa," for example, despite having survived repeated molestations and rapes as a child and young woman, "was not sure if she qualified for the study . . . others surely had worse experiences" (12). Hall's interview with Vanessa powerfully illustrates the barriers lesbian survivors of sexual abuse face in the process of recovery. Her research also emphasizes how much drug and alcohol addiction further complicates the treatment of sexual abuse survivors. Health care providers should be alert to the possibility of untreated sexual trauma in any of their addicted patient populations and, conversely, should be aware of increased susceptibility to drug and alcohol abuse in patients who have survived sexual abuse. Such knowledge can be of immeasurable value in prevention and treatment of addiction in at-risk populations of lesbian abuse survivors.

Teresa Scherzer's study of domestic violence in lesbian relationships is particularly thought-provoking. Scherzer asks how the lesbian community sees, or fails to see, lesbian battering and what impact this has on lesbians in abusive relationships. She emphasizes that although studies have shown that abuse within lesbian relationships is as prevalent as it is in heterosexual relationships, there is often confusion even among health professionals about which woman is the victim and which the perpetrator. Although heterosexual male perpetrators also often make themselves out to be the victims, they are far less likely to be believed than are lesbian perpetrators. Homophobia further clouds the issue, as overly protective and idealistic communities minimize lesbian battering for fear of homophobic repercussions. Lesbian abuse victims are legitimately fearful that mainstream institutions are unequipped to meet their needs. As the lesbians in Scherzer's study point out, they have even fewer options than straight women in trying to escape battering.

Scherzer puts out a call for future research that will develop and seek answers for the questions her research raises:

> One question . . . was whether domestic violence in lesbian relationships does genuinely involve shifting of power relations between the partners, or if the shifts occur from relationship to relationship. . . . [A]nother issue for future research to tackle is that of "mutual aggression"—does abuse or violence in lesbian relationships ever exist within a genuinely "mutual" pattern, where neither partner continually dominates the other? (46)

Scherzer's questions may provoke strong reactions, both within the lesbian community and among health care professionals unequipped or unwilling to deal with lesbian battering or even to entertain the possibility that there can be mutual exchanges of violence, that victim and perpetrator are not always fixed roles. Still, Scherzer is absolutely right—questions about the nature of lesbian violence, and whether or not it differs from heterosexual violence, must be asked and answers sought by researchers from within the lesbian community. We owe it to ourselves, and in particular to the survivors of lesbian battering among us, to face these issues with honesty and compassion. As a community, we are now secure enough in our identity to confront the abusive side of some of our relationships. We also must work to clarify the nature of power in lesbian relationships without resorting to idealism or depending upon a heterosexual model which may not fit.

In a study called "Lesbian Pass/ages: Invisible Lives and Issues of Community," Barbara Isaac and Barbara M. Herringer coauthor a piece highlighting problems of invisibility in older lesbians. If aging lesbians are not partnered, they are assumed by health care providers and institutions to be heterosexual. As one participant commented,

> If you're a lesbian and go into old age alone, you have to pretend you're

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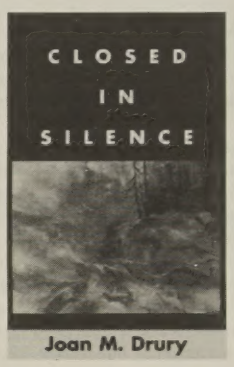

A Woman Determined
by Jean Swallow
ISBN: 1-883523-28-1
264 pp * $10.95 * Trade Paper
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By the author of *Leave a Light On For Me* and *Out From Under: Sober Dykes and Our Friends*.

When Margaret Donovan is hit by a car, she hires attorney Laura Gilbert to represent her. But this is more than simply the story of the impact of an accident upon a victim and those close to her: this is also the history of a close-knit lesbian community and the effects of crises upon that community, its members, and its institutions.

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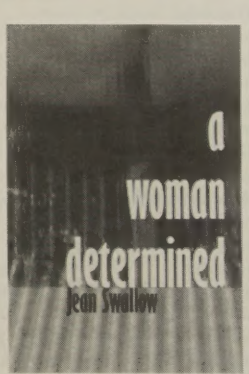

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> a straight person, or someone asexual. There's an assumption that you're heterosexual. It's a concern of mine that in my old age I'm going to be thrown into these institutions that serve straightness. (54)

Isaac and Herringer ask the important question of just who will care for aging lesbians: their families of origin or their chosen friends and families in the lesbian community? If it is to be chosen family, we must have legal powers currently not available to us, and we must be able to discuss our plans and wishes with health care providers. As Isaac and Herringer note, many lesbians have been subjected to the homophobic scare tactic that being lesbian means being alone and abandoned in old age. Although there is no inherent truth to this, it remains true that many of us will enter old age with few financial resources, and we may find those in the community who wish to care for us systematically excluded from our care. The health care practitioner who is aware of older lesbians' needs can be sure that resources are available and that families of choice have access to them and power to make decisions for them if they become ill and incapacitated.

Kathleen A. Tiemann, Sally A. Kennedy, and Myrna P. Haga coauthored an informative study on "rural lesbians' strategies for coming out to health care professionals." Although the study was small—only 8 lesbians—and cannot be used as a general model, the strategies these women used will be familiar to most of us. It is both bitter and funny to read an account by one woman who came out to her allergist:

> He was going on and on about yeast infections . . . and I finally said, "Dr.—, I'm a lesbian." And he said, "Oh, my dear. You know you are really a very good looking woman." . . . And he was going to give me a shot for it! He figured it (lesbianism) was part of a yeast allergy. And he thought it would "take care of my social problem as well," is the way he put it. (69)

Rural lesbians, who may have far fewer choices in health care providers than their urban sisters, employ multiple strategies for negotiating homophobia. Urban lesbians who have good relationships with their health care providers, as I do, may be shocked to hear that such ignorant and misguided doctors are still blindly practicing their strange forms of "healing." That lesbians anywhere are still subject to such outrageous mismanagement of care is evidence alone that **Gateways** should be required reading for all health care professionals.

In another study, Patricia E. Stevens skillfully incorporates the narrative insights of lesbians of color into a guide for improving care. One participant explained,

> What the health care field really needs are more humanitarian advances, not technological advances. . . . When health care providers are helping people who are sick and ailing, their hearts need to be there . . . no matter if we are poor, if we are lesbian, if we are Black, if we are fat or skinny. Rather than begrudge us, providers need to see their skills as a gift. (92)

Another emphasized that

> health care providers need to welcome lesbians of color in a way that makes us feel like family. What is imperative to stem the tide of prejudice that women of color suffer is for nurses and doctors to decide: We are going to take care of you like a sister would take care of a sister. (92)

Ponticelli made an unfortunate omission by not including any studies on lesbian accessibility to reproductive technology or the particular needs of lesbian mothers seeking health care. The lesbian baby boom has been in full force for some years now, and there have always been lesbian mothers in our community. Lesbian mothers are at least somewhat dependent on health care providers throughout the reproductive and mothering process. Because of the risk of AIDS and other STDs and also because of personal and legal concerns, more and more lesbians are choosing reproductive services rather than known donors to create families. We are also systematically and routinely denied access to these services by homophobic health care providers. I hope that the struggles faced by lesbians wishing to mother will be an area of further study.

Because the goal of the research in **Gateways** was to ensure the centrality of lesbians of color, these studies were all qualitative. Quantitative research must also be pursued in order for health care providers to have as broadly accurate a view as possible of who lesbians are and what we need in terms of health care. As Jocelyn C. White and Valerie T. Dull note in their study on communication between lesbians and health care providers in Oregon state, their findings suggest

> that sensitive communication between providers and patients that does not assume heterosexuality has a positive impact on lesbians' willingness to disclose sexual orientation, and disclosure of sexual orientation is associated with seeking health care early, getting Pap smears, and discussing other sensitive issues. Providers now have specific health-related incentives to ask questions and phrase intake forms in a way that does not assume heterosexual orientation and demonstrates knowledge of lesbian health issues. (108)

To this I can only add that lesbians have a right to expect nonhomophobic health care. Homophobia can indeed be hazardous to our health, as it encourages us to be fearful of seeking medical help and, when we do, fearful of disclosing relevant information. Health care providers' discomfort or unfamiliarity with lesbians' health needs means that lesbian patients receive substandard care. And homophobic providers endanger lesbians' health on multiple levels.

As a whole, the research in **Gateways** raises more questions than it answers, but this is as it should be: We are still at the cusp of defining who we are and what our health needs are. **Gateways** makes an important contribution to understanding the diversity of lesbian health care needs and offers concrete advice on how these needs may be better met. I hope North America's healers are listening. It could make all the difference next time we go in to get that dreaded pelvic exam.

Although all of the articles in **Gateways** were previously published in the **Journal of Lesbian Studies**, Volume 2, Number 1, 1998, they are also available as a whole in this collection or as single articles through Haworth Press (1-800-342-9678). ❖❖❖

Rachel Rose *currently lives in Montreal and writes full time. Her first collection of poetry,* ***Giving My Body to Science****, is forthcoming from Brick Books.*

Sexuality in the Novel

by Rita S. Kranidis

Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel by Lisa L. Moore. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997, 191 pp., U.S. $16.95 paper, ISBN 0-8223-2049-5; $49.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8223-2036-3.

This is a compelling book on the workings of lesbian and sexual identity in British novels. It covers novels ranging from less well-known ones from the eighteenth century to Jane Austen's **Emma**. Moore's selected novels include **Millenium Hall** (1762) by Sarah Scott, John Cleland's **Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure** (1749), and Maria Edgeworth's more popular **Belinda** (1801). Therefore the focus of the study is earlier rather than more recent fiction.

The analysis undertaken by Moore is fascinating in that it belongs to that school of literary thought and criticism that resists the traditional divisions between society, culture, and literary production. Although she consults the existing criticism of the novels she examines and considers how possible misreadings may occur for present readers, Moore seems to be more interested in making the argument for forging links between literature and society, ideology and material practice. One of the special strengths of the book is that, unlike many critics, Moore goes to some trouble to incorporate the problem of socioeconomic class in her readings of these novels and does not seem at all interested in producing a one-dimensional understanding of these texts as dynamic cultural products. Moore's case is made abundantly clear and is forcefully and persuasively argued: "Sapphic" English novels like the ones she analyzes here are ruled by many ideological, literary, and cultural constraints, so that the final text is both a product of and insubordinate to its determining contexts.

Moore reads her novels alongside historical documents and other social texts (including social practice), thus allowing the meaning and importance of her chosen novels to emerge as having been determined within very specific and complex contents. In general, the backdrop for this analysis is contemporaneous social commentary on women's friendships, the social interpretations of women's sexual activity or inactivity, and the construction of the English national identity in relation to colonial and domestic appropriations. These cultural and historical details offer a necessary context for understanding and appreciating the import of the novels' messages, which are never unambiguous in themselves. It is possibly the book's greatest strength that the author has presented us here with the fruits of much interesting and original research. Her ability to speak with some confidence of women's lives in the periods she discusses does in fact work to support her more abstract claims, some of which come across as rather unsettling discourses with no apparent connection to the matter at hand. Such instances are represented by this sentence in the **Belinda** chapter:

> At the moment when Juba and Mrs. Freke clash, then, all the alternative possibilities for representing female sexuality that are being generated and unsuccessfully contained in Belinda's world of female domestic power break out into the larger national and international space. (101)

Agency is not always clear in examples such as this, and the dynamic that is being described often has not been outlined previously, and so we are asked to follow credulously for some time until the evidence is presented. In other instances, the correlations between "sexualized" versus "gendered" that are all too clear to Moore are not entirely clear to this reader:

> And, crucially, because Emma usurps the position of teacher, her role in the relationship [with Miss Taylor] becomes sexualized: she educated her governess not in the lessons of the schoolroom but "on the very material matrimonial point of submitting" her will to a husband's. (126)

In contrast, Moore's discussion of more concrete subjects like the practice of slavery as it impacts (and—her thesis—is impacted by) a novel like **Belinda** is persuasive, even given the complexity of her argument, as is her analysis of the imperative of domesticity in **Millenium Hall** and her discussion of desexualization through Christianity in this novel.

Much of the complexity and trouble Moore encounters in conducting her analyses is that the novels she examines take up a number of positions at once, many of them contradictory. A novel like **Millenium Hall**, as Moore observes, both valorizes female communities and independence from marriage and also reinscribes women's patriarchal functions and societal roles. Also, it is made clear that the sexual and other identity issues that are negotiated in the novels intersect with and mediate social and political dynamics that fall beyond the purview of the category of gender. Realities like women's relation to property and to the transactions in human beings, whether in the service of domestic service, marriage, or slavery, share many correspondences and are intricately commingled in the lives of women.

Read alongside the problem of sexual identity and subject positioning, which, as we have all come to appreciate, are bewilderingly intricate matters, the novels and their contexts offer a web of significations and interpretations that are challenging to unravel. Although it is clear that Moore appreciates the difficulty of making the kinds of leaps she does in bringing together literary with historical and social analysis, she may not have succeeded entirely in presenting her findings in a manner that would be easier for more of us to fathom and, in the end, to bring to our own appreciation of the novels.

Although the subject matter is fascinating, Moore's book will interest mainly academic readers and those among us who do not mind a dense and rather taxing read. It isn't meant for just any academic either, I think, but rather for those in the know, so to speak. Even if we like our lesbian criticism with a cup of coffee, we are likely to sit upright with pencil in hand for this one. ❖❖❖

Rita S. Kranidis *teaches Victorian Literature, Cultural Studies, and Women's Literature at Radford University. She is the editor of* ***Imperial Objects: Victorian Women's Emigration and the Unauthorized Imperial Experience*** *(Twayne/Macmillan 1998) and author of a new book on Victorian spinsters' colonial emigration (forthcoming from St. Martin's Press, 1999).*

Love at First Sight

by Andrea L. T. Peterson

Beginnings ed. by Lindsey Elder. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1998, 190 pp., U.S. $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-55583-427-2.

Telling our stories: This is how we know we are alive, how we know we have a history, and how we come to understand that history. In a short collection of 51 short stories, including different versions of a few of the same stories, Lindsey Elder has compiled another chapter in the still-unraveling history of the lesbian community. Stories together with other stories help to build a sense of community among women and define who lesbians are or who we might be as a community.

In **Beginnings**, dozens of women from all walks of life describe their first encounters with the women who became their long-term partners. What is especially enriching and encouraging about **Beginnings** are the experiences of women whose first meeting did not smack of "love at first sight" and whose relationships have weathered the storms over the years that tried, turned upside down, and even on occasion brought about the termination of the relationship.

Although any relationship that gets past the honeymoon stage and settles down into routine domesticity is to be applauded, there are a number of first encounters shared in **Beginnings**, interesting though they were, that have yet to prove that they have led to "long-term" relationships. Perhaps Elder's focus is more on "the first time they met" than on "their long-term partner," in which case these relationships that are only a few years old at the time of their participants' telling are perfectly suited to the book.

All of the accounts were interesting, and all—especially together in one volume—show the many ways women meet, the many ways they understand their relationships, and the many ways those relationships play out. **Beginnings** reveals that there are as many women who do not expect the romantic relationship that develops once they have met as those who believe love-at-first-sight is the only explanation for the magnetism between partners and the duration of the relationship between them.

But **Beginnings** also shows that between the unexpected and the love-struck there are many—countless—ways in which women first meet partners and at least as many different ways of interpreting those meetings. There are blind dates, childhood or young adult friends not seen for years or decades. There are community and social events like nights out at the local (or not so local) bar or bookstore, birthday parties, music festivals, and dinners. There are shared, common interests and there are opposites that definitely attract. There are professionals, blue-collar workers, and hourly wage earners joining those who share their economic levels and mixing with those at different economic levels.

It is no mystery that love crosses conventional boundaries of race, creed, color, or any other social, geographic, or even psychological distinctions between potential partners. What is a mystery is how such diverse partners establish meaningful, lasting bonds. Elder doesn't try to explain this; **Beginnings** just illustrates that, without a doubt, it is so.

So often a book like **Beginnings**, with stories of people's lives and relationships, is opened with the expectation that the more visible women in the community will be spotlighted, known names and faces will appear, and their lives will be shared. What is so nice about **Beginnings** is that, for the most part, the women whose stories it tells are not known outside of their own personal social circles. Real people and real lives—people whose lives are no more privileged or public than those who will read their stories. People with whom readers can identify.

Beginnings is not a recipe for success and should certainly not be read with that expectation. This book is unquestionably a collection of stories that tell of the beginnings of relationships that have been significant and life changing for the women who tell them. For that reason, if for no other, this easy-to-read book is equally easy to recommend.❖❖❖

Andrea L.T. Peterson *lives in Virginia with her partner of 11 years and does freelance writing for a dozen different publications in the United States and Europe.*

Lookin' Good, Baby

by Heather Cassell

Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities ed. by Dawn Atkins. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998, 467 pp., U.S.$32.95 paper, ISBN 1-56023-931-X. $69.95 cloth, ISBN 0-7890-0463-1.

Did you ever look into the mirror and wonder who the woman is staring back at you? You might wonder who she is every day as you watch her change with age. Does she feel beautiful? The vicissitudes of our feelings about our bodies are wonderfully captured in **Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities** edited by Dawn Atkins, a collection of academic and personal essays and poetry. Although the book encompasses more than just the lesbian community, it is primarily made up of essays and poetry by lesbian and bisexual women.

The importance of **Looking Queer** is immense considering the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender struggles for acceptance in this world and the effects of mainstream society in our community each time we make progress. In the '90s the lesbian and bisexual women's communities have seen icons splashed on the covers and inside the pages of popular magazines, prime time television shows, and hit movies. "Lesbian chic" grabbed our community and hasn't let go. After six years of media attention and a new tentative acceptance (depending on where you live), the lesbian and bisexual women's communities are beginning to take a step back and ask, "What is the price we have to pay for acceptance?" Clearly, our body image and our own style is playing a game with mainstream standards. We are affecting the mainstream and the mainstream is affecting us. For lesbian and bisexual women, we have to assimilate to be accepted and we've bought into it. We are paying with our bodies and our image.

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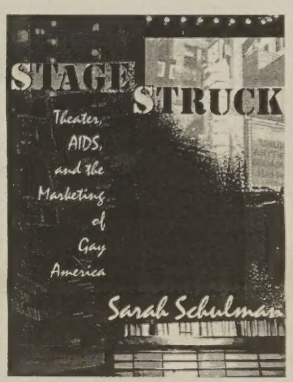

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Naomi Tucker addresses the strict standards of beauty within the lesbian and bisexual women's community in her essay, "Contradictions of the Spirit." She writes,

> We simply exchanged one obsession for another. An obsession to replace body fat with muscle is just as destructive as an obsession to starve oneself into angular, bony bodies. Similarly, the pressure on lesbian and bisexual women to look butch enough, to be the femme fatale of the lipstick lesbians, or to be the most athletic, or tough, or sexy can be just as destructive as the pressure on heterosexual women to look "good" to men. (43)

Later Tucker states, "I do think that we need to consciously discern what is personal taste or individual choice from what is social pressure to conform, submit, and suffer" (45).

The lesbian and bisexual women's communities are already suffering. Take a look in our popular publications: **Curve**, **Girlfriends**, **Diva**, **Flirt**—and the list continues. These publications send a message. They show us how to remain "looking" lesbian while fitting into the world at large, but fitting into the world doesn't always include large or average-sized women. And we too send messages with our constant dance of wanting our "lesbian" identities and to be "out" in the world. We restrict what is deemed radical and unattractive like sweeping dirt under the carpet. The mainstream can only see the best of us instead of accepting what is real: our diversity.

In their study, "Resistance and Reinscription: Sexual Identity and Body Image Among Lesbian and Bisexual Women," Sara Auerback and Rebekah Bradley cite Sari Dworkin's and Xan's arguments that lesbians face body image problems just as heterosexual women do. "Dworkin argued that lesbians suffer from negative body image to the same extent as do heterosexual women. . . . [S]he described the presence of discrimination against fat lesbians within lesbian communities as well as the abundance of diet advertisements in lesbian newspapers" (28). Another observer of the problem, Xan, an African American woman,

> drew a contrast between the social circle of her aunt, who is an older lesbian, and the gay community she found at school. Her aunt's friends, she explained, are "large, small, medium, tall, short, skinny . . . more like the real gay community, the older gay community." In contrast, Xan found women on campus to be "thinking in heterosexual terms" by holding onto an "exoticized version of the lesbian," a lesbian aesthetic which has entered more mainstream media looking much the same in size and shape to heterosexual women in the media. . . . Xan saw within the more visible lesbian social circles at school a look that conformed to mainstream images—thin, and no less important, white. As a black woman who found her body becoming larger the less she focused on sports, Xan felt out of place and unattractive among this crowd. (33)

There's more to "lesbian" image than just the different styles and labels, or the old community's versus the young community's standards. Many lesbians claim that coming out freed them from their body image issues, as Drama Rose writes in her essay "Big Grrl": "The acknowledgment that I could not only accept my big body but that I could revel in its largeness was incredible information that I got only after coming out as a lesbian" (133). I don't doubt Rose"s affirmative statement, but Anna Myers takes a brave step for herself and lesbians like her in her essay, "The Beauty Norm: A Femme Strikes Back":

> To some, lesbians appear unaffected by negative body image. Our communities profess to welcome women who defy the beauty standard. The comfortably clothed, androgynous, lesbian look challenges the patriarchal ideal. Nevertheless, that patriarchal ideal affected me deeply. . . . I learned, one can be a lesbian and bulimic. Lesbianism, the queer community—neither can free us from the appearance obsession. I had to choose freedom. (84-85)

The problems the lesbian and bisexual women's communities are facing concerning image, body, and eating disorders is something that desperately needs to be discussed instead of shrouded in silence. It is only when we discuss what is happening to our communities that we can take control and recreate our own image and our own bodies in a healthy and positive way. **Looking Queer** not only opens the conversation but also delivers some potential solutions.

Diane Griffin Crowder identifies four major concepts that underlie the movement to recreate the lesbian body in her essay, "Lesbians and the (Re/De)Construction of the Female Body":

> First, lesbians want to develop bodily strength and express that strength physically. Second, a "natural body" ideology attempts to strip away culturally imposed physical values. Third, the lesbian body should be *distinctive*, not confused with that of heterosexual women. Finally, expressions of lesbian sexuality necessitate creating a new understanding of the relationship between the body and its discourses. (58)

She supports her theory by describing how strength is important for lesbians as "self-defense" and using "space differently . . . to occupy the full volume of space around the body." She divides the "natural body" into two thoughts, the first being that the body should be allowed to "express" itself and the second wanting to "eliminate social interventions" and replace them with "strong values." Crowder identifies two trends that create the "lesbian look": lesbian-feminism of the '70s and today's return to "feminine" clothing and the roles of butch, femme, and androgyny. Lastly, she states that lesbians have redefined sex that includes "most parts of the body." Crowder concludes by noting, "[W]e find a movement to reconstruct a lesbian body that is neither 'masculine' nor 'feminine' but 'Other' and radically different" (62).

Reconstructing our body is a task that takes consciousness of our selves and what the world tells us. It is only from this position that we can determine what is truly ours that makes us happy about our bodies and our image. **Looking Queer** is the first book to look seriously at the issue of body image, not only linking it with sexual orientation but thoroughly exploring the undercurrent and the celebration of ourselves and our bodies. Don't miss this book, especially if you have body issues. ❖❖❖

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A League--but Our Own?

by Akilah Monifa

Playing in a New League: The Women of the American Basketball League's First Season by Sara Gogol. Indianapolis, IN: Masters Press, 1998, 295 pp., U.S. $14.95, Can. $20.95. ISBN 1-57028-199-8.

There are no lesbians in the American Basketball League. At least no "out" lesbians. This includes coaches, players, management, and trainers. So it is difficult to explain the large percentage of lesbians who attend the games as spectators. But of course that is the story. The climate is such in most professional women's sports, but particularly in basketball, that not only are lesbians discouraged from coming out, they are handsomely rewarded for their blatant heterosexuality. Husbands, boyfriends, pregnancies, children are seen as proof positive that women are heterosexual. In **Playing in a New League**, Sara Gogol alleges that differences in sexual orientation in the ABL did not matter and that that was an appealing aspect of the new professional basketball league (106). But from my viewpoint it is only irrelevant as long as one is closeted. So you will not find much discussion about lesbianism in this sports book. The closest we get is to occasional references to the athletes being referred to as "tomboys" when growing up. It's not that I hold Gogol responsible for this phenomenon; it's just curious that in a story of the first season of the ABL there is mention of heterosexuality but not of lesbianism. But I digress.

From the inception of both professional women's basketball leagues (the ABL and the WNBA), there has been competition: Which league can make the most money, garner the most fans, attract the marquee players? Could both leagues survive simultaneously?

The ABL derives its roots from outsiders: no NBA affiliation, nor college, nor high school. No high-powered media contacts, just a group of folks from the Silicon Valley, California with a commitment to women's basketball. With promotional phrases like "It's a Whole New Ballgame" and "The Time is Right for the ABL." And their latest, "Real Basketball."

Sara Gogol's book chronicles the inaugural year of the ABL. Gogol, a Portland author, started out to write a children's biography on Kathy Steding of the Portland Power. After interviewing Steding, Gogol changed the focus of her book to adults and a historical study of the first year of the ABL.

First she briefly covers the history of both basketball and women's professional basketball from the All-American Red Heads (l936-1986) and Hazel Walker's Arkansas Travelers in the '40s, '50s, and '60s to the Women's Professional Basketball League (1978-1981), which in many ways parallels the ABL in numbers of teams and attendance. Next we discover the short lived Ladies' Professional Basketball Association (LPBA), lasting only four games before its demise but three games longer than the Liberty Basketball Association with only one exhibition game in 1991.

Gogol attributes the Olympic bronze medal victory in 1992 and the gold in 1996 as the catalyst for energizing women's basketball and fueling a desire for a women's professional basketball league. Using the backdrop of the start of the ABL as the theme of her book, she wants to know about the women involved in the league: "What were their lives like? How had they come to be involved with this level of basketball? How did they feel about living out a piece of history by participating in the first year of a new pro league?" (2).

Gogol is like me and other women who had a chance to play basketball in high school and perhaps college but, even if we possessed the skills and the drive, knew that a pro career in the United States was an unattainable dream. Players who started in the ABL even months before its inception simply thought that if they wanted to continue to play after college, they would have to go elsewhere. Jennifer Azzi, Teresa Edwards, and most of the U.S. National Team players made commitments to play in the ABL, although some name players committed and then switched later to the WNBA.

Before the season started there were tryouts in Atlanta, with 570 participants paying $200 each to ensure that only serious players (with $200) would try out.

Gogol devotes a chapter each to profiling official and unofficial founding players Kathy Steding and Christy Hedgpeth. One gained the status of official founding player if she was a member of the 1996 Olympic women's basketball team. The ABL offered an opportunity to play professional basketball in the U.S. for certain, but the money was low and the longevity of the league was in question from the start. Given the history of women's professional basketball in this country, could a professional league thrive on the coattails of the Olympics?

Gogol next chronicles two players who were in the category of 60% of the 80 players in the ABL, players who had been or were playing overseas. She meticulously describes the angst of deciding whether to play outside of the United States, take a chance on the shaky ABL, or wait for the anticipated WNBA. Gogol traces some individual players, including Stacey Ford, who played for the Portland Power, and Adrienne Goodson, who played for the Richmond Rage. Ford has the most curious comment in the book, saying that "race is irrelevant in players' relationships with

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each other" (106). This comment is not explored much further except to say that one of Ford's best friends in college was a white girl. It has been my experience that, as Cornel West and others have stated, "race matters." This would have been a good theme to explore further and to talk with other players and coaches about. In a subsequent chapter, Trisha Stafford of the San Jose Lasers states, "A lot of times I do feel like more opportunities are granted to Caucasian women in basketball." Stafford's direct contradiction of Ford's we-all-get-along statement is not explored.

The race-is-irrelevant comment is followed by Gogol's notion that "[t]he players' example, their role modeling of a mini-society where individual differences like race and sexual orientation and ethnic backgrounds by and large didn't matter, is one especially appealing aspect of the life in the league" (106). Perhaps the ABL is different from the rest of the world; but in light of my experiences in and out of sports and their existing power dynamics, this concept was difficult for me to accept. Certainly gender issues, sexual orientation, sexual harassment must have arisen, but they are not mentioned.

Overall, **Playing in a New League** is a hodgepodge collection about the first season of the ABL. Gogol attempts to do too much and succeeds only in painting with a broad brush about the ABL. She does cover the league from a number of different perspectives: coaches and players, media directors, management, women who played overseas, women who played college ball in the United States, and reentry basketball women players. It is an overview at times fascinating but lacking depth and analysis. It is important to chronicle history, and the ABL was and is history. It is shocking that there aren't more books about the season. Gogol is a maverick on that account. Her book is certainly fine as far as it goes, but I would have wanted better insight into what it was actually like to play in the ABL. What was the travel schedule like? What problems were encountered? What sacrifices did the women make to play a season in the ABL?

By all accounts, the upstart ABL has a hard row to hoe. It is reported that $4 million was lost in the first season. Many folks are waiting for the league to die out and predict that the WNBA will be the league that remains when the dust clears. Gogol's task was in many ways limited by her approach. The book is really a mini-biography of a few people involved in the inaugural year of the ABL. Sometimes we get a better sense of what is involved depending on where the focus is placed. Perhaps in this day of instant books there should have been some down time before someone attempted to reflect on the first season of the ABL. Gogol does give a good basic understanding of why and how the league came to be. What **Playing in a New League** lacks is the fire and fury of a live action game. It also lacks the kind of analysis that can only come with reflection. But for what is there, Gogol does tell the story; and if you want a simple overview of the ABL in a somewhat documentary format, *voilá*. ❖❖❖

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Practicing with Values

by Elizabeth P. Cramer

Foundations of Social Work Practice with Lesbian and Gay Persons
ed. by Gerald P. Mallon. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1988, 298 pp., $49.95 cloth, $24.95 paper. ISBN 0-7890-0348-1.

One of the major professional associations for social workers, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), adopted a policy statement on lesbian/gay issues in 1977 that emphasized nondiscriminatory social work practice with lesbian and gay persons. The profession's Code of Ethics includes provisions that instruct social workers to obtain education and seek to understand diversity and oppression with respect to various personal characteristics, including sexual orientation. Furthermore, the Code of Ethics mandates social workers to engage in social action to prevent or eliminate oppressive acts and structures, including those that affect lesbian and gay persons. The accrediting body for undergraduate and graduate social work programs, in its Curriculum Policy Statement, requires that social work programs provide content about people of color, women, and gay men and lesbians and that social work programs must not discriminate against persons based on their sexual orientation. (Recent policy changes in accreditation standards allow for a religious exemption to the nondiscrimination statement.)

The professional literature that addresses topics relevant to social work practice with lesbian and gay persons is growing. Articles include such topics as identity development and disclosure; youth, midlife, and old age; health and mental health; and social service delivery. Other helping professions besides social work, however, seem to provide more coverage of lesbian and gay issues.

Gerald Mallon, editor of **Foundations of Social Work Practice**, notes that a 30-year review of social work journals found that less than 1 percent of the total articles focused on lesbian and gay persons. Perhaps this dearth of literature specific to social work practice explains in part the suitability and timeliness of **Foundations of Social Work Practice**. Additionally, elective courses on social work practice with lesbian and gay persons offered in some social work programs provide a market for this book.

The 11 chapters of **Foundations of Social Work Practice** are written by various well-known (and some less well-known) writers in the field; most are associated with academia in some way, perhaps a weakness of the book. Although a foreword provides a brief historical context for the development of the book, along with some notes on the foci and themes of the book, an introduction by the editor is lacking. I would have preferred an introduction that describes the book's chapters as well as discuss the systems theory and ecological themes that are utilized in all book chapters but are elucidated to various degrees depending upon the chapter. Because the editor intended that all contributors use systems theory and ecological themes as the basis for the chapters, I found the omission of an introduction puzzling. I also believe the contributors' repeated definitions of various terms, such as *homophobia* and *coming out*, to be unnecessary, as there is a glossary at the end of the book that defines these terms.

Four themes emerge in nearly every chapter. First, social workers need to understand their own assumptions, values, and attitudes toward lesbian and gay persons and how these may influence their practice with this population. Second, it is the responsibility of social workers to work to reduce their own and others' homophobia and heterocentrism, the latter defined as the assumption of heterosexuality and the privileges held by those who are heterosexuals. Third, a person-in-environment focus when working with this population is essential due to the impact of such environmental conditions as discrimination in employment, insurance benefits, housing, child custody, health care; rejection of lesbian and gay persons by family members, friends, religious organizations, and other significant persons and institutions; and the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on gay communities. Finally, social workers are mandated to advocate for nondiscriminatory practices and policies toward lesbian and gay persons.

The first chapter of the book, "Knowledge for Practice with Gay and Lesbian Persons," written by the editor, begins with a review of sources of knowledge for foundation (baccalaureate or first year master's) practice: practice wisdom, personal experiences of practitioners, a knowledge of professional literature, a knowledge of history and current events, research issues that inform practice, theoretical and conceptual analyses, and information provided by client cases. Practice wisdom is a compilation of experiences of the profession and professional colleagues. The life stories of lesbian and gay clients, and the practice experiences of practitioners who work with lesbian and gay clients, are handed down to other practitioners. Through practitioners' sharing of their experiences with lesbian and gay clients, the field has identified relevant practice issues, such as disclosure of the practitioner's sexual orientation. Mallon argues that knowledge of professional literature informs the practitioner of current practice theories and techniques with this population, and an understanding of lesbian and gay history and current political and social events provides a context for appreciation of lesbian and gay lives. Research on the experiences of the lesbian and gay population and evaluation of practice interventions generates knowledge about the population. An awareness of theories and conceptual models related to sexual orientation, such as identity development theories, challenges heterocentric theories that are presented in typical foundation social work practice textbooks. Lastly, Mallon reminds the reader that it is important to treat each client as a unique individual—to inquire about the identity formation experiences of the person, to affirm the environmental conditions that may be oppressive, and to assess for internalized homophobia.

Peg McCartt Hess and Howard Hess are the authors of the book's second chapter, "Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice With Lesbian and Gay Persons." I found this chapter to be well-written and unique. The authors methodically apply each of the six core values and related ethical principles in the Code of Ethics to practice with

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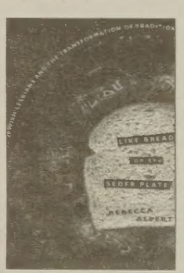

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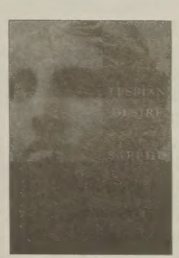

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lesbian and gay persons. The core values and related ethical principles are as follows. 1: Value: Service. Ethical Principle: Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems. 2: Value: Social Justice. Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice. 3: Value: Dignity and Worth of the Person. Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person. 4: Value: Importance of Human Relationships. Ethical Principle: Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships. 5: Value: Integrity. Ethical Principle: Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner. 6: Value: Competence. Ethical Principle: Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

The authors provide examples, including case vignettes, to illustrate ethical practice principles. For example, in their discussion of the value Social Justice, the authors give an example of a community that was concerned about hard-to-place infants. The local adoption agency recruited a number of lesbians and gay men who wanted to adopt these infants. Although some members of the community challenged the agency's policy of allowing lesbians and gays to adopt, the agency staff resisted the pressure and instead began a program of public education and advocacy to promote gay and lesbian adoptions.

The next chapter, by Karina Walters, is an excellent essay that focuses on gays and lesbians of color (GALOCs). The premise of the chapter is that GALOCs' racial or ethnic identity and gay/lesbian self and group identities are connected to psychological well-being. GALOCs often feel a conflict of allegiances because of membership in two, or sometimes more than two, oppressed groups. They are frequently faced with handling multiple social roles and crossing many social and cultural boundaries. They may experience homophobic and heterocentric responses within their own racial or ethnic group: racism within the predominately white lesbian/gay community, and racism, homophobia, and heterocentrism from the dominant society.

Walters describes a multilevel, multidimensional model of GALOC identity that analyzes self and group identity attitudes across both lesbian/gay membership as well as racial/ethnic group membership. Combined positive gay/lesbian and racial/ethnic identity attitudes buffer against conflicts in allegiances and contribute to a more positive sense of psychological well-being. Those persons who hold positive identity attitudes in one community (racial/ethnic or lesbian/gay) but negative in the other may be at risk for developing negative coping strategies, such as internalized homophobia or identifying as gay in primarily gay settings and as racial in racial settings. Persons who hold a combined negative identity (negative gay/lesbian identity and negative racial/ethnic identity) are most at risk for negative psychological consequences.

The author discusses several practice issues facing GALOCs, including identity attitudes, acculturation level, cultural values, and immigration status. She recommends several micro (direct practice) and macro (larger systems) interventions.

Michael Shernoff, a well known therapist, is the author of chapter 4, "Individual Practice With Gay Men." Due to the focus of **LRB**, I won't discuss this chapter. The following chapter, Audrey Steinhorn's "Individual Practice With Lesbians," provides an overview of issues facing various populations of lesbian clients, including those who are married, adolescent, older, coupled, parents, disabled, from rural locales, domestic violence victims, substance users, and religious. I found the organization by type of lesbian to be frustrating; I would have preferred the chapter to be organized by issues with notations to various populations (e.g., coming out as an issue and then notes for particular groups such as adolescents, mothers, older women). I also found such statements as the following to be simplistic and essentialist: "Most lesbians do not choose their sexual orientation just as most heterosexual people do not choose theirs" (109). Perhaps the author did not want the presumably heterosexual audience to be privy to the debate, particularly in queer studies, about the cause(s) of sexual orientation. I also would have liked to see a more critical questioning of the role of therapy for lesbians, given that there has been some discussion in the literature about whether therapy for lesbians is depoliticizing.

Chapter 6, by George Getzel, focuses on group work with lesbian and gay persons. After a discussion on the merits of group work in general, the author provides some examples of the literature on group work practice with lesbians and gay men. I found helpful his discussion of the elements of group process and their benefit to lesbians and gay men in groups. He provides case examples of groups that handle the issues of identity, crisis situations, and existential conditions.

The next chapter on lesbians and gays in families, written by the editor, discusses lesbians and gay males within the context of their families of origin, their families of creation, and parenthood. I particularly appreciated the author's discussion of differences between lesbians and gay men in such areas as development, personal identity, gender role, and socialization norms. In general, most of the other contributors assumed similar experiences between lesbians and gay men. The author's discussion of the potential for families of origin to be nurturing and supportive of their lesbian or gay family member reminds the reader that not all experiences with families of origin are abominable.

Chrystal C. Ramirez Barranti wrote chapter 8 on practice with lesbian couples. The author does a commendable job of challenging some of the earlier literature that characterizes lesbian couples as pathologically fused and enmeshed. She also discusses the influence of same-gender socialization, the impact of nonnutritive environments, internalized homophobia, and how all of these affect lesbian couplehood. A discussion of nonmonogamy was missing in this chapter but interestingly was discussed in the following chapter, which focuses on gay male couples and won't be described in this review.

The book's last two chapters focus on macro interventions: "Social Work Practice with Gay Men and Lesbians Within Communities" by Joyce Hunter and Gerald Mallon and "Social Work Practice With Gay Men and Lesbians Within Organizations" by George Appleby. The former chapter includes the book's first discussion of substance on the transgendered community (granted the book does not claim to include bisexuals and transgendered persons). The authors note the importance of habitat (the place where an individual resides) and niche (one's position in the community). Various examples of institutions and organizations in which gay and lesbian persons participate are given, including those institutions and organizations lesbians and gay men have created to serve as a buffer to an unresponsive and/or uncaring dominant culture. The final chapter offers suggestions for organizational policies and procedures that are affirming of lesbian and gay employees.

On a final note, the case vignettes illustrated "real-life" practice situations, but I found most of them to be superficial and wished that there had been more discussion of the practitioners' interventions. The vignettes in the micro-oriented chapters focused on micro interventions, whereas those in the macro chapters described macro interventions. Case illustrations that demonstrated combined micro and macro interventions (as often is the case in social work) would have been more beneficial. Furthermore, most contributors assumed that the reader/practitioner is heterosexual. More tips for gay practitioners would have strengthened the book. ❖❖❖

Elizabeth P. Cramer *is an assistant professor of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her practice, research, and scholarship areas include domestic violence, group work, and lesbians and gay men.*

Lesbians and the Practice of Law

by Akilah Monifa

Sappho Goes to Law School by Ruthann Robson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 303 pp., $17.50 paper, ISBN 0-231-10561-4. $49.50 cloth, ISBN 0-231-10560-6.

Ruthann Robson is not the typical academic with mostly inaccessible, dry, boring writing. In addition to being a law professor, she is also a published novelist, having written two novels, **A/K/A** and **Another Mother**. She has also published short stories and legal books. Probably most well known for **Lesbian (Out)Law: Survival Under the Rule of Law** and **Legal Issues for Lesbians**, she has also written **Gay Men, Lesbians and the Law**, which has been described as a primer for teenagers.

Sappho Goes to Law School is a collection of essays, some of which have appeared (albeit revised for the book) in law journals and books. Robson opines in the introduction that "[i]f Sappho were alive today, she would be attending law school" (xiiii). Just think of how different law school would be if we employed the "Sapphic" method instead of the "Socratic" method of legal theory that still exists in some degree in contemporary law schools! The essays explore lesbian legal theory:

> Some consider the complexities of lesbian identity itself and others consider the ways in which legal doctrines and theories posit lesbianism, often to the detriment of persons who call themselves lesbians. These essays also attempt to unravel the relationships between feminism, Postmodernism, and lesbianism in terms of legal theorizing. Several essays also analyze the constructs of family and relationships in lesbian legal contexts, especially as enforced by state power. Finally, interwoven throughout the essays are many of . . . [Robson's] own experiences as a dyke law professor at a progressive law school. (xvi)

Robson currently teaches at City University of New York (CUNY) at Queens. I taught at New College of California, also a progressive law school. And believe it or not, these terms are not oxymorons. I've met Robson on several occasions, at law conferences and once when I interviewed for a position at CUNY Queens. Her body of work is quite impressive. **Sappho** is divided into 13 essays exploring lesbian legal theories.

Chapter 1: "To Start With, We Need a Lesbian on the Supreme Court."

The first essay deals with this proposition and the notions of the effects that identity, in particular lesbian identity would have on the highest court in the land. What effect would it have upon cases before the Supreme Court? How, for example, would the equal protection clause be expanded? or how would the Bowers v. Hardwick case be decided? Would a lesbian jurist be less homophobic and more embracing of racial, ethnic, and class differences?

Chapter 2: "Sl/ashes"

The next essay is "Incendiary Categories: Lesbian/Violence/Law." A tough category, one we don't like to discuss, whether the violence is directed at us by a nonlesbian or inflicted by another lesbian. We would like to think that we are less violent to each other than a homophobic society is toward us. But unfortunately that is not necessarily true. We are dealing with violence that totally engulfs us.

Chapter 3: "Convictions: Lesbians and Criminal Justice"

The position of lesbians in the criminal justice system is rarely discussed in legal advocacy and theory, despite the jokes and notions that women criminal defendants, particularly those whose "victims" are men, are in fact lesbians. What is the effect of raising a "battered women's defense" if one is a defendant in a murder trial when the "victim" is your lesbian lover? Consider how long it took folks to be accepting of the defense for straight women. Will a jury accept the defense raised by a lesbian? Consider the statistic cited by Robson, quoting Victoria Brownworth, that 41 percent of women on death row in the United States have been "implicated as lesbians" (351), whereas only a small percentage self-identify as lesbians.

Chapter 4: "Embodiment(s)"

This essay stands isolated as the only chapter that is too theoretical for my tastes. The notion is that of lesbian legal theory coexisting with other bodies of legal theories like feminist, postmodern, and queer theories. One has to be theoretical by nature to enjoy this type of discourse. I wrote a chapter on lesbian legal theories and practices yet to be published. The title was "Abridged Excerpts From the Diary of a Queer African American Law Professor: A Very Personal Essay or This Would Never Happen to Professor Kingsfield." I joked that the original title of the piece was "The Intersection of Pedagogy, Sexual Orientation, and Queer Subordination and Its Constructs in the Classroom." This chapter is not *that* dense, but it is still much more theoretical than the rest.

photo: S.E. Valentine

Chapter 5: "Reflections and Taxonomies: the Feminist Jurisprudence Question"

This chapter begins with the examination of a task of compiling books for a feminist jurisprudence bibliography project. Robson noticed the dearth of "HQ" books on the list. "HQ is the bibliophilic classification for sexual matter" (75). Lesbian issues have been systematically omitted from these projects.

Chapter 6: "Beginning From (My) Experience: The Paradoxes of Narrative"

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open?" Muriel Rukeyser said in her famous poem, "The World Split Open." Traditional legal scholarship is typically written in a format created by white men. A more narrative style has been used and published by Progressives women, people of color. and queers; it is often maligned as not being "intellectual" enough, or good enough scholarship, by traditional white male scholars. Robson reviews the critiques of this style of writing, discusses the paradoxes, and ultimately convincingly argues "that we must never reject or neglect our sexual energy in all its various expressions" (111).

Chapter 7: "The Codification Of Lesbian Relationships: Examples from Law and Literature"

Lesbians and lesbian relationships have rules. Fortunately, some of those rules as they apply to prohibiting our sexual conduct have been abolished in a number of states. However, most of the rules and laws do exist. Robson argues that any such rule or codification of our lives "narrows our lesbian choices" (130). She suggests that the boundaries be expanded in order to be freer and live more fully.

Chapter 8: "States of Marriage"

This chapter actually focuses very little on the much-awaited decision from Hawai'i. Rather, it deals with the overall struggles of the "state's" control over lives, offering analysis of the Supreme Court cases about this issue as well as the concept of abolishing marriage in toto.

Chapter 9: "Resisting the Family: Repositioning Lesbians in Legal Theory"

"Family" as currently constructed leaves "lesbians . . . positioned as either outlaw or in-laws" (170). Therefore, there needs to be either a new definition or a repositioning of lesbian vis-à-vis the family. Progressive domestic partner statutes do this in their definitions of family that are expansive enough to include lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people. We need to be mindful of definitions that continue to posit us as sister outsiders. Not "alternative" family, but simply family. .

Chapter 10: "The Third sex, Third Parties, and Child Custody"

In this chapter Robson argues for the abandonment of both the heterosexist and sexist boundaries that have classified us as "the third sex" and regulate our child custody issues as if we are also outside of the norm--a practical continuation of the abandonment of the (out)law theories. Furthermore there are sometimes "three categories of possible third parties: the lesbian nonlegal mother, the sperm donor, and the grandparents or other biological relatives." (170). The third-party system and its associated doctrines do not assist lesbians, so we should abandon them.

Chapter 11: "Neither Sexy Nor Reasonable"

In this chapter Robson debunks Judge Richard Posner's book, **Sex and Reason**. As one might suspect from the name, Posner is not a lesbian; but he, like many other nonlesbians, thinks he knows about lesbians and has chosen to share his thoughts via his writings. I think the chapter title sums up Robson's position.

Chapter 12: "To Market, to Market: Considering Class"

Variances of race, religion, and gender identities are, in this chapter, juxtaposed against the less variable status of economics. Consider the effect of the words "dressed inappropriately" and "professional" when buttressed against culture, ethnicity, and/or religion. Thus it is relatively simple to see that there can be no "standards" for these terms.

Chapter 13: "Lesbian Sex in a Law School Classroom"

Robson concludes with this chapter on sex, discussing the difficulties of teaching a subject entitled "Sexuality and the Law" when it is on the same class list as torts, tax law, administrative law, and the like. There is an added burden if you teach these classes when you are an out lesbian. I taught a narrower version, a class entitled "Sexual Orientation and the Law," and like Robson I constantly struggled with the proprieties and boundaries of the subject matter and with my role as teacher (with the added layer of race and ethnicity). Couple that with the inherent diversity of the students in the classroom based on age, class, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, and sexual orientation, and it is like nuclear physics.

And so I come back to Sappho, wondering how she would fare in such a class and what her thoughts would be. One can wonder and dream a Sapphic legal dream. Yet this book is not just for future or present law students, lawyers, law professors, and judges. Nor is it just for lesbians. This work is essential for all critical thinkers who are examining their place in American law and society. ❖❖❖

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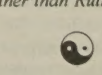

THE FICTION CORNER

Linking Lives

by Tiya Miles

Don't Explain by Jewelle Gomez. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1998, 168 pp., $10.95 paper, ISBN 1-56341-094-X; $22.95 cloth, ISBN 1-56341-095-8.

Black women from different geographical locations, time periods, and worlds seek and create connections that transform their lives in Jewelle Gomez's newest collection of short fiction. In these wide-ranging stories, which include a futuristic novella, a new Gilda story, erotica, serious themes, and humor, Gomez brings to life her characters' quests for self-understanding, relationship, and wholeness. She explores the complex inner worlds of Black women and gives shape and voice to women whose lives are often deemed inconsequential by virtue of their occupation and the communities they live in.

"Don't Explain," the title story of this collection, is one of its strongest. Letty, a middle-aged woman who has been working as a waitress in Boston since moving from the South, struggles with her unspeakable identity. In 1959, when the story takes place, Letty feels intense shame about a previous sexual relationship with a woman and expresses both her loneliness and her displaced desire through an attachment to Billie Holiday. Every day, Letty listens to the same Holiday song while on her break at the 411 Lounge. Even as Holiday's music becomes a haven for Letty within the bustle of the 411 Lounge and a lifeline amidst Letty's isolation, Letty resists the implications of her continuing need to hear a Holiday song which hints at same-sex love. However, when Holiday dies, Letty allows herself to briefly consider the meaning of her feelings for the singer:

> It was more than the music, Billie was her hero. Letty saw Billie as big, like herself, with big hungers and a hard secret she couldn't tell anyone. Two weeks before, when Letty had heard that Lady was dead, sorrow enveloped her. A door had closed that she could not consciously identify to herself or to anyone. It embarrassed her to think about. Like it did when she remembered how she'd felt about Maxine. (22)

Billie Holiday's death leaves a void in Letty's life and pushes her further into emotional isolation. When Delia, another waitress at the 411, invites Letty to a small gathering of women at her home, Letty is reluctant to attend. Although Letty has taken on the role of being the younger woman's caretaker at work, the women's friendship has not progressed to the point of spending time in each other's homes. At Delia's urging, Letty finally agrees to visit, and when Letty steps into the small apartment shared by Delia and her cousin, she realizes that the Black women who are playing cards, smoking, and talking all have something in common: "These women were friends, perhaps lovers, like she and Maxine had been. The name she'd heard for women like these burst inside her head: bulldagger. Letty flinched, angry she had let it in, angry that it frightened her" (27). Letty's realization that there is a community of women like herself is alarming at first, and then reassuring. She will continue to wrestle with her sexuality, but she will not have to do it alone.

Jewelle Gomez's rendering of Letty's conflicted emotions is painfully touching. In addition, the setting that Gomez constructs for Letty's story is vibrant and historically resonant. In the descriptions of a restaurant that is a meeting place for pimps, prostitutes, parents, and children, Gomez recreates the intricate interconnections of tightly knit Black communities prior to integration. The location of a Black lesbian community, neither ostracized nor fully visible, within the larger Black community further develops this picture of the diversity of Black communities in the 1950s.

In the story "Grace A," Gomez also treats isolation and connection in Black women's lives. "Grace A" is a work of autobiographical fiction, modeled after Gomez's relationship with her own great-grandmother. The story is one of few in African American literary history that explores the shared experiences of Blacks and Native Americans and addresses the particularities of mixed-race, Black-Indian identity.

Grace is an older woman who has settled into a quiet, solitary life when her great-granddaughter comes to live with her unexpectedly. She is unsure of how to relate to the girl and is slightly resentful of her presence, yet she tries to show the girl that she is loved and wanted. In the central scene of the story, Grace is confounded by the necessity of braiding a child's hair, a task she has not performed in decades. She gruffly commands the girl to sit between her legs and tries to make sense of the head of hair before her and the relationship she must undertake with the child. The feelings of resentment, confusion, fear, and love shared between the woman and girl are well displayed in this nuanced and familiar scene.

Through this universal moment in Black women's experience, Gomez shows Grace and her great-granddaughter struggling to connect across a divide of age, temperament, and secret feelings. As Grace sections and braids the child's "wiley" hair, she remembers her troubled relationship with her own mother and her mother's arrangement for her to marry an old Wampanoag man when she was only fourteen. Through the pain of this memory and others, Grace feels a sense of protectiveness for the girl and speaks to her tenderly: "'We're about done,' Grace said, resting her hand on the child's shoulder gently. She smiled at the plump skin, remembering what a child felt like. Then it frightened her, the softness, the dependence" (32).

The complicated and slowly unfolding relationship between Grace and her great granddaughter is written with a tenderness and intimacy that makes this story compelling. Gomez has plans to develop this piece into a full-length work.

"Steps" centers on a young woman who, like Grace, confronts her own childhood through memory. Ramona Edwards has returned to her childhood home, an apartment building in Roxbury, Boston, to collect her deceased mother's things. This story about the painful tion are at times uneven, each has an engaging character, idea, plot, or moment to offer. In particular, "Steps," "Grace A" and "Don't Explain" are well conceived, emotionally compelling stories. Each of the stories in this collection fills a gap, opening a window on lives that are not often chronicled, and offering emotional

secret of Ramona's past is well told and emotionally potent. It attests to the perseverance of memory and demonstrates the power of place for conjuring submerged memories.

The story begins with Ramona mounting the steps to her old apartment, where her stepfather, Earl, still lives. Her childhood memories come alive in the silence and emptiness of the grimy staircase. And as the reader follows Ramona's journey, step after heavy step, the mounting realization of Ramona's history unfolds. In returning to claim her mother's belongings, Ramona must confront her stepfather and molester. As she walks, Ramona recalls a neighbor who tried to help her, her mother's deep feelings for Earl, and her own unanswered need for her mother's protection.

This story succeeds because the characters are not simple cardboard cutouts. Ramona's mother may or may not have known about the abuse and may or may not have thanked Ramona for her silence. Earl is a multifaceted character who is at the same time abhorrent, ashamed, needy, and unmindful of the weight of his actions. Rather than being the "monster torturing her" that Ramona remembers, Earl is "simply casual, self-absorbed" (46). Ramona is both child and adult, fearful and brave, resentful and understanding of her mother's choices. As the story concludes, she breaks her silence about Earl's abuse and finds retribution through her voice.

Gomez shifts to a pithy short-short style in "Ounce of Charm." In this humorous and erotic tale, Juanita, a Department of Human Services employee, experiences a sexual awakening when she buys the new perfume, Charm, to lure a man. Idell, the narrator of the story and a security guard at Juanita's office, explains the root of Juanita's dating problems: Although Juanita is pretty, "when it comes to a woman searching for a man, smart cancels out good-lookin' like a sixteen-wheeler splats a possum" (51). Juanita purchases Charm as a last resort, because, according to Idell, "On the radio they kept saying it made you irresistible, you know, to the opposite sex. Some kind of gnomes. Pheronomes . . . something . . . mixed in it. Like a smell you can't smell that you supposed to have anyway" (51). But instead of attracting a man, Charm leads Juanita to appreciate her own sexuality and launches a romance between Juanita and Idell.

"Piece of Time" chronicles the beginning of another romance in the collection. Here Carolyn, a paralegal who feels that her life is empty, falls in love on her tropical island vacation. Although the fantasy plot is a bit too familiar, Gomez takes a moment to demonstrate a theory of oppression in lived experience articulated by bell hooks and other feminists of color. Carolyn looks at her lover, Veda, a maid in the hotel where she is staying, and considers the impact of colonialism on Veda's life: "The term *colonialism* might not roll naturally off Veda's tongue, but she knew it when she saw it. She talked about the people in her town who worked in luxury hotels and had to take turns at home having running water" (79). Although Veda may not know the terminology of oppression, her lived experience tells her that she is oppressed.

Carolyn never directly confronts the reality that she herself is staying in a luxury hotel and Veda is her maid. Seeing Carolyn struggle with her love for Veda and her own complicity in colonialism and consumer tourism would have given this story depth. Similarly, "Water With the Wine" and "White Flower" are love stories that merely touch on engaging themes—negotiating a significant age difference, remaining in a relationship where control is unequally held. Yet in the end these themes are only superficially explored, and the stories feel vaguely dissatisfying in their conclusions.

In the major undertaking of this collection, the novella "Lynx and Strand," Gomez portrays the United States in 2080. The country, or "the Society" as it is called, subjects the population to close scrutiny and tight controls. The prevailing value of the Society is order, so individuality, variety, and unpredictability are suppressed. Young people are directed toward suitable career paths that they are expected to maintain; couples who intend to marry must post their intentions so social engineers can be sure of the individuals' compatibility.

The three main characters of the novella—Strand, her best friend Nelson, and her lover Lynx—challenge the dictates of the Society by undertaking the project of a full-body tattoo (88). They believe that by rejuvenating the outlawed art, they are refusing to accept the limiting dictates of the Society. In addition, they contend that "art is magic" and believe that a dramatic transformation will occur once the tattoo is complete (123). Nelson, named for Nelson Mandela, is a tattooist who must hide his equipment from government surveillance agents as he works on Strand's full-body tattoo. Strand, an advertising agent, hopes that the tattoo will empower her to save her lover, Lynx, an empath who is in danger of being hospitalized by a government that seeks to control her gift. All three characters know that if their plan is discovered, they will face certain punishment.

"Lynx and Strand" begins as an arresting story. The veiled threat of the power of a society that, in Lynx's words, is led by "a government that's a corporation" is haunting and timely (130). However, the concrete workings of the society, the detailed textures of everyday life, and the real danger to the main characters are not fully fleshed out. This lack of specificity is intriguing at first, but becomes frustrating later when the meaning and repercussions of the characters' act of resistance remain unclear. Why choose a full-body tattoo as a means of rebellion? How does the tattoo have the power to alter lives so profoundly? Why is a tattoo so threatening to the Society? Gomez does not adequately address these questions. Finally, assumptions behind the three characters' dream of escaping the Society by going West remain unexplored. Their desire seems to retrace the historical movement of U.S. expansion and reinscribe an imperialist image of the West as a free and open place.

Each story in this collection has an engaging character, idea, plot, or moment to offer. In particular, "Steps," "Grace A" and "Don't Explain" are well conceived and emotionally compelling. Each story opens a window on lives that are not often chronicled and offers emotional contemplation and catharsis. ❖❖❖

***Tiya Miles** is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at the University of Minnesota, living in exile at Dartmouth College while she writes her dissertation.*

Two New Worlds of Wonder: Lesbians Shape the Future

by Sheela Ardrian

Dark Water's Embrace by Stephen Leigh. New York: Avon Eos, 1998, 331 pp., U.S. $3.99 / Canada $3.99 paper. ISBN: 0-380-79478-0.

Six Moon Dance by Sheri S. Tepper. New York: Avon Eos, 1998, 454 pp., U.S. $23.00 / Canada $30.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-380-97479-7.

In **Dark Water's Embrace** Stephen Leigh weaves an amazing story which actually combines three different plotlines at three different times in history; descriptive markers and character names help to keep track. All take place on the planet known as Mictlan (a name taken from the Nahuatl language, referring to the Land of the Dead in Aztec/Mayan mythology). Indeed, one story line concerns the fate of the Miccail (another Nahuatl name, meaning "The Dead"), an alien race who mysteriously disappeared a scant thousand years before human colonists arrived. The other two story lines feature the human colonists; one covers the earliest phases of the colony and the other covers "contemporary" time. Despite the distance in time, the main characters of the three lines have profound impacts on one another.

The contemporary thread emerges first and remains dominant, although the supporting threads contain far too much action to be dismissed as mere background. Here we follow Anais Koda-Levin the Younger, who makes a valiant effort to fit into the colony—rather more effort than it perhaps deserves in spite of certain physical and psychological traits which make this difficult. Anais tells her story in the first person, and sometimes her two closest companions do the same, marked "voice" in the chapter headings; other accounts provided for context (and marked as such) appear in the third person.

Moving back in time to the earliest thread, we next meet the gentle Miccail called KaiSa; this thread is told in third-person and its elements are marked "interlude." KaiSa represents the third sex, which humans call "mid-males" and which the Miccail themselves call *Sa*. Caught in a terrible historic struggle, KaiSa does some incredibly courageous things in an attempt to save the Miccail race. Finally, the middle account comes from the journals of Gabriela Rusack, one of the original colonists and a lesbian of great fortitude and sharp wit. Gabriela's most pronounced talent is a knack for pulling triumph out of tragedy.

Interestingly, all the threads share the same basic themes: racial survival, sociopolitical dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. Because of an accident, the northern colony was left with only nine inhabitants, and they lost contact with the southern colony almost immediately; this does not hold out much hope for survival, but, humans being stubborn, they naturally try anyway. The colony grows very slowly due to very high rates of infertility, miscarriage, birth defects, and infant mortality—on top of the dangers to adults from wild animals, inclement weather, disease, and so forth. An ugly upheaval shatters the Miccail civilization and leaves them in a similarly precarious racial position. The solution for both turns out to be surprisingly similar and delightfully original. The author actually managed to surprise me more than once in this novel, which is not at all easy to do, and if you want the chance to be surprised also then you should set aside this review for a while and go read the book. It really is spectacular.

However, the content is so rich and so relevant to lesbian interests that I'm going to continue discussing it for those of you who prefer to hear the whole story before buying a book. Leigh possesses a remarkable touch when it comes to depicting human nature and the kind of catastrophically stupid things people sometimes do. It just so happens that the colonists develop a rabid hatred for lesbians. I say "develop" because, before the ship exploded and marooned the nine colonists on Mictlan, Gabriela was married to a woman named Elzbieta; after the accident, the colonists manifest some odd mental quirks, and prejudice is one of them. They wind up driving Gabriela out of the colony. They also drive Anais out because they caught her making love with Maire; the irony of this is that Anais *cannot* be a lesbian—because Anais turns out not to be a woman, despite what everyone thinks. So there are lesbians in this story, and people who are like lesbians but aren't, and the dynamics of all that are just fascinating.

More to the point, Leigh captures the insanity in lurid detail, because in both cases the expulsions put the already fragile colony at risk. Shunning Gabriela costs the colony an intelligent, able-bodied adult. Shunning Anais costs them their best doctor, since the older one is going blind from cataracts and the younger apprentices have barely started training. Without certain later developments that salvage part of the situation, shunning Anais could very well have spelled the end of human survival on Mictlan. As it is, things settle out reasonably well in the end.

Also, Leigh posits a striking role for the often-used but rarely justified third sex motif in science fiction. Mictlan possesses some quality which leads to rapid mutation—whether it's background radiation, a selection of natural mutagens, a substance that encourages the hopping-gene phenomenon, or something else entirely is never specified. The *Sa* provide a means of stabilizing the genome so that infants conceived through them are free of the many birth defects that plague simple male/female matings. Anais turns out to be not a woman with "a mild to moderate hermaphroditism" as originally thought, but a kind of human *Sa*. After being shunned, Anais also discovers the remnants of the Miccail race, in the form of native creatures known as "grumblers" which the humans had always believed nonsentient. The return of the *Sa*, human and Miccail, to the island sanctuary of AnglSaiye offers hope for both races.

Solid characterization makes the action believable and engrossing. The background cultures make sense, and within those contexts what the characters do also makes sense. Leigh handles individual relationships as adroitly as larger social and scientific elements.

Consider the following journal excerpts in which Gabriela describes falling in love for the second time, with the girl Adari:

> "Gabriela, I . . ." she began. I waited, the brush still halted in midstroke.
>
> "When did you know that you . . ."
>
> *. . . that you were a rezu . . .* I heard the rest of the question without its being said. . . . "That I preferred women to men? I think I always knew. It just took a very long time for me to finally listen to myself." I waited, trying to see what was behind those dark, dark eyes. "That's a strange question to ask."
>
> A shrug this time. "I've been doing some listening, too," she said, very quietly. "To my voice." . . . "Gabriela, I think you're beautiful."
>
> "Yes," I told her. "I've felt the same feelings toward you."
>
> "Then why can't we at least try?" she asked. . . . "No one else has to know."
>
> "But they *will* know," I told her. "No matter how discreet we try to be, someone will find out. And we wouldn't *want* to hide it, Adari, not if it's to be more than a one-time thing."
>
> "I want to make love with you, Gabriela. . . . I don't think that's wrong."
>
> "It's not wrong," I told her. . . . "It would be a mistake. . . . Adari, *mojo ljubov*, there can't be any happy endings here, not for us." I told her that. I meant it. Then, may all the *kami* help me, I went ahead and made the mistake. (175-177)

Religion plays a subtle yet pervasive role in all the storylines, too. The humans seem to have settled on an Eastern worldview featuring the *kami*, which can be local nature spirits, human ancestors, deities, or any mix of the three. The Miccail worship a variety of deities, but the one who exerts the most influence over events is the enigmatic VeiSaTi. Their religion includes a respectfully depicted and accurately rendered version of ritual sacrifice. Leigh credits his original inspiration to the book **The Life and Death of a Druid Prince**, and I must say that the resulting ideas, however far extrapolated, have a satisfyingly solid foundation. Interactions between humans and Miccail suggest that the different inhabitants of Mictlan are in some ways evolving toward each other; and you can put a mystical or practical spin on this, whichever you prefer.

The author also provides a substantial amount of background material in addition to the story itself. A glossary at the beginning describes the languages of Mictlan, both human and Miccail, and defines many of the key words used in the story. This artful piece of xenolinguistic mastery comes with an initial description of the crew on board the doomed *Ibn Battuta*, along with notes on how the survivors created a blended language from their diverse heritage. Then at the end of the book, an appendix presents the genetic makeup of the crew members who became the matriarchs and patriarchs of the colony, along with a list of the matriarchal offspring and the lineage of primary human characters. Finally, there is a map of the ancient Miccail highroads and TeTa lands which shows AnglSaiye, the Black Lake (near which the human colony eventually settles), and other points of interest. Like the chapter headings, these help readers follow the intricate plot lines of the story.

Dark Water's Embrace offers an absorbing read. You can approach it as sociological science fiction, as lesbian romance and tragedy, or as any one of several other options. All are well worth your time. Highly recommended.

Six Moon Dance, by Sheri S. Tepper, takes place in the far future, but it begins in the distant past. It begins with a strange mating between two aliens known as Quaggi, millions or billions of years ago, in the then-young star system that would eventually harbor a human colony on a world called Newholme. We share the ensuing events from the perspective of diverse characters, each with their own unique worldview, in a style that my business manager calls "first-person schizophrenic" when I do it—but it works beautifully here, so maybe Tepper just does it better than I have thus far managed. (The author thoughtfully provides a cast list of major characters in the front of the book.) So we get the story in bits and pieces, individual threads meshing together to form a tapestry.

First we meet Mouche, a young man of Newholme embarking on a promising career as a professional consort for wealthy ladies—that is, a Hunk. Then we meet Ornery, a young woman of Newholme, who doesn't care for the high-placed but personally unappealing position of women in society and therefore disguises herself as a man to become a sailor. We also meet the sinister Ashes and the repugnant Dutter boys, the important Hags D'Jevier and Onsofruct, and some assorted Family Men. The Newholme aliens are all aspects of one vast consciousness which incorporates Bofusdiaga, the Corojum, the Joggiwagga, the many tim-tim, and sundry others. My favorite is the peculiar pool known as Fauxi-dizalonz, described as a "gender bender" (although based on certain plot developments I would consider it more of a gender blender). Add the non-Newholmian characters of the enigmatic Questioner, the totally mysterious Quaggi, and the human dancers Ellin Voy and Gandro Bao, and you get one very mixed drink indeed.

The plot of the story chiefly concerns the fate of Newholme and its diverse residents. The Questioner wishes to determine whether the society is maintaining itself through illegal practices—more on the relevant incivilities later—because of its dependence on Hunks, Hags, Family Men, breeding women, and other entertaining social constructions. What the Questioner doesn't figure out until fairly far along is that all of this is about to become irrelevant unless they convince a Quaggi egg not to hatch. Since the egg is inside Newholme and is nuclear-powered, this quest assumes paramount importance . . . and then the characters discover that they no longer have the choreographers needed to direct the dance, nobody remembers all of the dance, and the dancers who took care of this problem the last time it came up are, in the most literal sense possible, in no shape to do it again. The result is a rousing adventure as well as a sociological masterpiece.

Although **Six Moon Dance** does not contain any overt lesbian characters, it does cast women in most of the dominant roles, both in society and in the story. The author sketches out human relationships, especially women's thoughts and feelings, in great detail and accuracy. In that regard, this novel does have a distinctly lesbian feel, reminiscent of the intricate network of friends, lovers, and coworkers found in any lesbian community. The closest thing we have to an actual lesbian is probably the butch-ish Ornery, who "did not feel herself drawn to men at all."

Tepper handles the rest of the sociological elements with similar skill. Over the course of this story, she highlights the cultures of the alien Quaggi and tim-tim, the humans of Newholme, and the humans in the larger galactic settings ruled by the Council of Worlds, and the Questioner (who is a composite being based on the brains and memories of three different human women, the result being humanesque yet distinctly alien as well). The author delves into how these diverse cultures function both internally and in relation to each other, how they evolve over time, what goes on inside and outside and all around them.

One of my favorite examples is an excerpt from the legal precedents of a genius called Haraldson. I include it here because it is a perfect sample of the book's tone and because it is just plain brilliant in its own right:

> Haraldson further provided that persons must not only advocate but assure personal rights for all races, and that they must not discriminate against born, hatched, aggregated, or budded creatures on the basis of species, morphology, color, hispidity, gender, age, or opinion, except as species, morphology, gender, et al. provably altered the consequence of any given situation. It sounded innocuous enough until Haraldson made it clear just how inclusive he expected the term "opinion" to be. "Language, cuisine, the arts, culture, tradition, religion, sexual and reproductive practices vary widely among mankind and even more widely among other races. All these, therefore, are to be considered matters of opinion, to which every person is entitled, and the free expression of which is guaranteed up to and no further than the point at which that expression conflicts directly with someone else's opinion. Direct conflict shall be defined as incivility directed at a specific person or group as well as any action

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designed to alter someone else's opinion by coercion, law, or violence. . . . This means that any opinion may be expressed privately or in incorporated communities of the likeminded from which the nonlikeminded are at liberty to depart. When an opinion moves into another's zone of privacy and tranquillity, however, civility shall reign. If the Hairless Supremacists of Thor plan to march through a quiet community of furry Krumats with the sole intent of discomfiting the Krumats thereby, they may not do so, for though freedom of expression is guaranteed, a captive audience for an incivility is not."

This section comes from pages 27-28; the entire piece takes up much of chapter three from pages 26-31. Ah, if only we could enact such sensible laws in our own time! Of course, the drawback of all this is that it happens to be enforced by the Questioner, a being I would rather not meet.

Six Moon Dance has scope. It touches on all the most momentous issues and plot motifs: birth, death, love, hate, the nature of life, the dynamics of good and evil, sexuality, loyalty, justice and injustice, honor, hope, despair, the quest for the stars, personal and social evolution, the end of the world, individuality, unity . . . the list goes on and on. In addition to breadth it also possesses a rare attention to detail that makes every little scene leap to life, however subtle or bizarre. It will appeal most to fans of science fiction but is a great read for anyone, and quite satisfying from lesbian-futurist perspective. Highly recommended.

Special Commendation: Avon Eos deserves a round of applause for two distinct acts of brilliance. First is their commitment to combat soaring book prices which discourage readers to try different genres or authors; the special $3.99 price tag on **Dark Water's Embrace** and other select titles is intended to help readers explore new horizons without breaking the bank. Second is their continuing presentation of books which explore alternative sexualities in a positive light; this seems to be a pleasant side effect of their stated goal to publish the most evocative and innovative speculative fiction novels they can find. I think Avon Eos is meeting its goals admirably, I think this is good for the publishing world in general, and I believe they deserve our support. ❖❖❖

Having graduated from college with a major in Women's Studies, ***Sheela Ardrian*** *continues researching and writing in that area. She firmly believes in the infinite possibilities inherent in human nature and in the Universe at large. So far, her explorations and experiences uphold and expand upon these beliefs.*

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Polyphonic Reality

by Joan Kasson

Switch by Carol Guess. Corvallis, OR: Calyx Books, 1998, 300 pp., U.S. $14.95 paper. ISBN 0-934971-60-9.

Set in the small, provincial, mid-western town of Cartwheel, Indiana, the M&H diner serves as the focal point for the lives, experiences and personal thoughts of the working-class characters of Carol Guess's new novel, **Switch**. As in her first book, **Seeing Dell**, Guess relates the story through its characters' monologues, in separate chapters which in turn mold the complete story. Cartwheel, Indiana, despite its rural restrictiveness, provides a setting rife with covert desires and secrets. Threads of lesbian sex, personal sexual autonomy, butch/femme, and lesbian identity and invisibility tie these separate stories together. Overwhelming and compelling passions of the soul weave a convoluted yet connected storyline.

Utilizing the power of private dreams and hidden personal desires, Guess illuminates the direction, complexities, and contradictions relevant to human existence. Differing understandings of personal sensuousness express themselves in the daily routines and thoughts of both the staff and patrons of the M&H diner. The characters' internal monologues push "normality" not only upside down but also obliquely, thereby challenging mainstream assumptions of gender, sexual identity, desire, and the magical power of passion.

Caddie, a waitress at the diner, interprets the meanings of her need for a woman lover in a place and time where this hidden desire is both unspoken and unseen. She comes to a realization that the lack of lesbian models creates an opportunity for her to mold her own separate reality—one that includes cherishing other women. Into this Caddie-built world stream Caddie's coworkers, the waitresses and cooks, the owners, and the customers of the town's M&H diner. Each has a personal story and unique perspective, all coming together and playing out at the M&H diner. Each person's story is told not solely by herself but also through another viewpoint, setting, and place in time.

These individual musings loosely overlap while tying together a cohesive storyline. **Switch**'s characters, although working within constrained social constructions, manage to create differing possibilities with their lives. For example: Vera and Marigold, two elderly "sisters" who have lived together all their adult lives, camouflage, through time, their true biological heritages. Cartwheel truly regards them as sisters. Their lifetime passion, one for the other, perpetuates itself in their eyes when they are baptized in a Mormon baptismal conversion ceremony. Through this watery immersion the "sisters" believe they will spend eternity with one another. There will be no separation in the afterlife. Marigold whispers, "Caddie, we're safe now" (154). Their lesbian partnership will survive after death.

Carol Guess

Readers note that Guess's characters view the world through their own separate perspectives—their own slants on reality. As Caddie relates, "I looked at Jo [a passing, transgendered butch] and saw right through her, to the self no one else wanted or dared to see" (20). Caddie appreciates that her love for women permits the possibility of seeing Jo not as a man, as the rest of Cartwheel views her, but as a woman. Another time, Caddie reveals her lesbian identity to herself when she says, "I wanted my secret to be open, even if it was still a secret; I wanted people to see it, even if what they saw wasn't what they thought" (84). She realizes that even if people knew of her sexual desire for women, they wouldn't understand it. Guess points out that there are different levels of truth/reality according to the viewer and the perceived.

The author manipulates her terse yet meaning-laden language to express the inexpressible. Guess has Caddie allude to her lesbian identity when Caddie says, "My life was already so deep in mystery, my desires already so invisible" (144). Caddie asks herself what so many lesbians in small towns question. Am I the only one? Has this happened to others before? Who can tell me what to do? Caddie realizes she must observe, create, and play out her own rules and history in order to find happiness and contentment.

Guess speaks to a lack of lesbian language when she has Caddie say, ". . . it was never something I could put into words. It was the thing that always escaped language" (126). Caddie does not refer to herself as a lesbian. She realizes society's assumption of heterosexuality and its bonuses for compliance. She finds it difficult to buck society's expectations of her secret sexual desires. Nevertheless, as Caddie says, "There was no one description for rightness, just the knowledge that with men, everything was inches askew" (126). Guess develops Caddie's unspoken lesbian identity and points to Caddie's lack of a model when Caddie reveals her internal processing. After Jo tells Caddie that she loves her, Caddie says, "I did not know who I was now. . . . [A]ll I wanted to discuss was passion . . . I had nothing to help me decipher the world or understand what it meant that I wanted no part of it" (2).

We, the readers, understand the underlying lesbian sensibility that runs throughout the plot as a subtext; it does not need explanation, yet it does need to be explored. What does it mean about butch/femme visibility when Jo (passing as a man) insists that Caddie not cut her hair? After Jo demands that Caddie not cut her long hair, Caddie muses, "[Jo was] threatening me if I threatened to alter the difference between us by becoming more the same" (28). Will becoming more the same threaten Jo's passing or Jo's feeling of lesbian butchness?

Guess invites and challenges her readers to engage fiercely with both the stated and the silent text. Contrary to some lesbian fiction that follows either patterned romance or adventure genres, Guess's audience must indulge diligent engagement with the characters' internal musings for a pleasurable read. This is our world, replete with lesbian issues. It is the reader's thoughtful enjoinment with the issues and insights that stimulates enjoyment of this book. The reader is left to her own powers of interpretation, which have been shaded by her own life experiences, thereby yielding multiple meanings.

Guess's poetic style of writing, a selected stinginess of words, reminds one of Audre Lorde's writing. Both women deal with differing passions and the expression of these passions. Both write with a minimalistic style that nevertheless gives a deep richness of meaning. Each word is chosen carefully and weighted thoughtfully in order to exert a maximum effect with minimal verbosity. Guess's short but eloquent phrases demonstrate her strength, a poet's power of language. We, similar to Caddie's coworker Selena, can visualize the sights, feelings, smells, and sounds of the M&H diner: red vinyl booths, shiny silver chrome and hard Formica counters, even the tall, glass-enclosed pie display case coated over with the greasy air of cooking meats—the mixed sizzles and odors of eggs, onions, and burgers on the grill. Tight, descriptive words of pictorial richness pique all our senses. We are in the diner. But, unlike for Selena, the diner is not our

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passion. We are roaming in the minds, the inner thoughts, dreams, desires, and secret passions of ordinary, small-town, working-class Americans. Guess's characters are either caught in a process of transformation of their abundant mainstream assumptions or active in maintaining a status-quo life.
We readers quietly participate in the secret longings of the characters' individual hidden passions. Ways of seeing and being constantly change, crisscrossing borders of sexual identity, gender fluidity, and strange passions. A touch of magic adds the spice of the unknown to **Switch** (a lesbian novel could not survive without an all-knowing cat, could it?). Desires become outlawed, and the thrusts of passion transcend "normal" standards. Poverty, the work ethic of the working class, and homosociability blend together in **Switch**. This serves to demonstrate the mobility, power, and seductiveness of sensuousness in daily life.

Although the focal point remains the town's diner and its employees, a true storyline develops. This storyline propels forward despite the backtracking each character takes us in her or his life. Their many separate stories mix and enrich, layering each soul-laden confession. The monologues not only explain each character's thoughts and actions but color and explain the other characters, spinning unique poetries of the heart.

They also invite us to see past our own assumptions. Guess spins the history of Peg, a survivor of incest and lifetime abuse. We see how Peg has retreated into her made-up fantasy life. Her real self is buried under delusions, which act as a coping mechanism and allow her to prevail over her tawdry life. She uses withdrawal to escape from life's brutalities. Peg makes sex a painful endurance contest. Even during consensual sex, she describes what sex is to her: "to push myself past what I can endure, to come out knowing I can take anything" (208). She wins if she survives. Does this help us understand and gain insight into sexual violence, the pleasure of S/M, or why women stay with an abuser? How many people are burdened with insights they feel are too dangerous to reveal because they may lose their self-identity?

The characters' multifaceted ideas about sex, identity, relationships, and their unique, separate realities project meaning with a well-chosen paucity of words. Sentence-length paragraphs pack a wallop and have the reader backtracking to discover and rediscover meaning. I found myself reading this novel slowly because I did not wish it to end; the pleasure was too great. Intelligence and lesbian sensibilities are teased out—contrary to many blunt, obvious fiction stories. True engagement with the characters provides multiple readings according to the reader's sensitivity and experiences. Guess has each character strip to the bone of the character's essence. The author's ability to reveal the characters' temporal transformations reflects Guess's abilities as an observer of human nature. **Switch** provides a simple storyline, but personal readings of the text provide many levels of meaning. With true textual engagement, **Switch** invites complex and thought-provoking ways of knowing. ❖❖❖

__Joan Kasson__ received her B.A. in Women's Studies from The Ohio State University in 1995, after retiring from a 30-year career in nursing. She and her partner, Dr. Jill Steuer, share their home with two cats, George and Ira Gershwin.

The Gospel of Assimilation

by Sylvie Constantine

Preacher's Lake by Lisa Vice. New York: Dutton, 1998, 472 pp., U.S. $27.95, Can. $39.99 cloth. ISBN: 0-525-94436-2.

Preacher's Lake is Lisa Vice's second novel. Her first one, **Reckless Driver**—which I unfortunately haven't read yet—earned her the fiction prize awarded by the Commonwealth Club of California, and the dust jacket of **Preacher's Lake** is covered in praise for Vice's first novel. The San Francisco Chronicle dubbed her a "powerful stylist." The **Washington Post** Book World reviewer assures us that "There's not a false note in **Reckless Driver**. The characters are so real they are painful to read about." Thus I picked up **Preacher's Lake** with a mixture of enthusiasm and compassion--after all, this was a lot of acclaim for a second novel to live up to.

For the most part, I found **Preacher's Lake** to be a very enjoyable read. It tells the story of life in a very small rural community in Maine, where many people live like pioneers (with no electricity or indoor plumbing) and congregate either at the one greasy spoon diner or on the front porch of the hardware store, chewing tobacco and eyeing all newcomers or passing tourists with an equal amount of contempt. They are "people from away" (58).

Not surprisingly, the "regulars" are not much warmer toward locals who display any signs of queerness. For instance, Derek is a five-year-old who clutches a lace curtain over his head like a stole every waking moment because, as his mother apologetically informs the town's bricklayer, whose stomach is unsettled by the sight of the boy clutching a bouquet of field flowers and humming the Wedding March,

> "Derek has wanted to be a bride ever since he started to walk. . . . We take him to this shrink over at the health centre. According to Dr. Leonard, Derek's got the Oedipal thing ass backwards. So twice a week I drive him over there so he can plant carrot seeds or whatever they do. The shrink says we all have to talk this over but my husband won't go in there. He calls Derek a little pansy." (47-8)

Of course, the little town also has its share of resident lesbians (whether they be local, transient, or migrant), proving that we really are everywhere. They too live their lives amidst the homophobic townsfolk. Each develops her own way of coping, with widely varying degrees of success.

To the author's credit, she does not portray queerness as a simple thing, but as a shifting amalgam of different—although related—prejudices regarding all things that are perceived to deviate from the norms that confer acceptability in Preacher's Lake. Coming from "away" is suspicious to the townsfolk and therefore queer. A woman like tall Nelly, who not only is a newcomer to the village but lives alone and works like a packhorse to build her own house, farm her land, and repair her tractor herself, displays a kind of stubborn independence which is both unseemly and unfeminine to the townspeople, who immediately call her a "he-she-man" and a lesbian long before she finally attempts to let another woman into her solitary life (45,58-59). Queerness does not necessarily entail a particular sexual activity; it can derive from anything that defies notions of propriety: aside from cultural and geographic difference, an unusual occupation, physical appearance or gender role considered to be "inverted" are all signs of queerness—like Nelly's butchiness or Derek's "pansyness."

As well, ten-year-old Crystal's peculiar and almost selective mental underdevelopment followed by periods of oracle-like prescience is another marker of queerness by virtue of difference and thus ample grounds for ostracism: The school kids call her a "retard," as do the old men who sit on the porch of Buster's hardware store. Her teacher tirelessly urges her father to send her away to a special institution—which he vows to resist doing (318-319, 388, 426). On the other hand, the elderly are effectively shut away in a nursing home as though they are no longer fit to live in society. "'If you can call it living,'" thinks Carol when she sees the bed-ridden and diaper-wearing Mrs. Thomas, 102 years-old, being spoon-fed "something green and grainy" over a towel spread "to catch what dribbled from her mouth" (186). When the elderly woman falls asleep, her hitherto attentive nurse steals her candy (188). This outrageous gesture seemingly indicates that, indeed, old age robs one of both rights and dignity—not to mention social regard—as people are prone to presume senility. Thus, the elderly are portrayed as queer in their own way.

Finally, racial differences and interracial relations are also equated with queerness and cause grave social outrage with the locals. Vice is particularly adept at describing key moments, marking with a chilling clarity the divide between outsider and insider. For example, when in a need to expand her geographic boundaries farther than Preacher's Lake, Rita, who is white (and a lesbian) walks into a diner in Bragdon with her dark-skinned daughter, pondering about the possibility of ever setting down roots somewhere, she sees a woman smirking at her who wears a T-shirt saying "How can a moral wrong be a civil right?" As the narrator pointedly states, "What had [Rita] hoped to find?" (56). There are many such scenes, and their poignant realism is so vivid it will undoubtedly cause hair-trigger reflexes in any lesbian who has ever been made to feel like an outcast. Vice's interweaving of many forms of prejudice (homophobia, racism, sexism, ableism, ageism) as interrelated because of the oppressed people's status as "Other"—i.e. their queerness being the backdrop against which "normality" is constructed—was absolutely fascinating and one of the best features of the book.

Another particularly impressive aspect was the book's structure, with multiple narrative viewpoints. There are never less than twelve concomitant plot lines, and Vice's skill as a storyteller is such that she moves effortlessly from one set of characters to the next and back again, pulling the reader right along without any trace of confusion. Aside from the scenes at Hydie's Diner and Buster's hardware, we also visit Crystal and her mom Janesta; Slim the dumpkeeper; Rita and her daughter Rainey; Nelly, the "farmer Brown from town"; Carol and Vivian, the hopelessly mismatched couple; Michael the stonemason; Lizzy, the straight woman who desperately longs for a child; Lizzy's lesbian friend J.T., one of the very few happily married people in the book; Dougie, Carol's gay male friend from New York; Joe, the parish minister; and Derek, the "budding drag queen" (96). Vice gets us interested in all of these oddball characters, who have their own complicated lives and concerns to deal with. Every time the narrative takes us back to one of these individuals, it is with fondness that we pick up the thread of their lives. This mastery of cyclic narration is in itself a tour de force and demonstrates such a love of storytelling on the author's part that I would recommend the book for its technique alone.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the reader to the main characters. The second takes us deeper into their psychological makeup and lets us witness the problems that affect their lives, such as social prejudices, the prospect of unemployment, being a single parent, and the breakdown of personal relationships. The third part, which I found to be the weakest, is about the characters overcoming their various dilemmas through community building. This presents us with a utopian—and, in my opinion, problematic—view of the politics of assimilation, particularly in the case of the lesbian characters. When comparing the outcome for these dykes, it quickly becomes apparent that are being given an argument for integration into the mainstream as the best method of survival, as opposed to confrontation or separation. Indeed, the only 'separatist' in Preacher's Lake (in the sense of refusing to seek approval or inclusion in the local community) is Nelly, and she turns to liquor and violence and ends up in a mental institution. Apparently, separatists are not fit to live in society.

By contrast, those who do 'make it' seek social acceptance by attending church, sending their children to Sunday School, and participating in community picnics held to celebrate baptisms. Tough luck if one is not a Christian. Even J.T., who is the only gay character to selectively confront the townsfolk about their homophobia, is tolerated only because of her willingness to attend church—not to mention that her partner is the very proper and unassuming town librarian. J.T.'s one act of defiance is to periodically challenge the parishioners to be better Christians by demanding during each service that they "pray for the oppressed lesbians in the world." (394) Miraculously, she does not get tossed out of church faster than a speeding bullet (as would certainly happen where I live), and no one tries to bash her, destroy her property, or force her to resign from her job as a nurse. We are obviously witnessing Preacher's Lake's transformation of itself into a utopia before our very eyes in the third part of the novel. This is all due to the arrival of the new pastor, Joe, who

in the true spirit of Jesus reminds people of God's love for everyone, and to not cast the first stone or stand in judgment of others. What a refreshing direction for a Christian church! But then, Joe also invites his flock to read from the Apocrypha[1]—heresy of heresies—and beckons them to "question all aspects of the service, to actively participate, not passively accept what came their way just because they were in church" (392-393). Here is where readers who survived a religious upbringing and/or whose family members are part of the clergy can again keel over with a sarcastic "Yeah, right!" Joe certainly sounds more like a philosophy professor than a man of the cloth. But perhaps there is still hope for Christianity to find its way back to its original roots, as Vice is able to imagine.

A more serious problem from a literary point of view is that in their zeal to become a happy, tolerant, and pious community, the characters seemed to lose their individual characteristics and became more or less interchangeable, so that in the end they lost a lot of their original appeal. In fact, by the close of the novel, the only one I had any compassion for was Nelly, the character who is portrayed as the least lovable person. Even though Preacher's Lake becomes an idyllic Christian landscape, there is no forgiveness or second chance for Nelly. No one suggests welcoming this prodigal daughter back to the fold, any more than they suggest celebrating lesbian unions (perhaps this would be going too far even in utopia?). Everyone is happy to see Nelly leave town, particularly when she promises not to claim her land. Apparently, queerness which resists colonization must be uprooted and gotten rid of, a message I found profoundly depressing and one that seems to go completely against the grain of the first two parts of the book, whose narratives celebrated diversity in a much more profound way than the very vocal but perfunctory appeal to tolerance of the conclusion.

Obviously, Christian lesbians and gays who already believe in and wish to adopt the politics of assimilation as their entry into mainstream society will find great comfort in this novel. Personally, I found the push for compulsory Christianity to be quite oppressive, not to mention unrealistic in the context of practically every Christian denomination's stand on homosexuality as a sin, which prohibits the advocacy of equal rights in the church or in the community at large. ❖❖❖

NOTES:

[1]The Apocrypha is made up of various texts that are not recognized by the church as being part of the Canonical Scriptures (for example, the Gospel According to Mary).

__Sylvie Constantine__ is a postgraduate research student in the School of Humanities at Griffith University (Australia). She is currently completing a dissertation in Lesbian Studies, the title of which is "Loosening The Bondage of Our Own Rules: Community, Politics & Desire." She will submit her Ph.D. dissertation in December 1998.

IT'S A MYSTERY

But Will Anyone Listen?

by Pele Plante

When the Dead Speak by Thérese Szymanski. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1998, 207 pp., $11.95. ISBN 1-56280-198-8.

Being partial to stories that wrestle with social issues, I was predisposed to find this book important due to its sexual and physical abuse subject matter, even if I didn't enjoy it.

This second Brett Higgins mystery has its beginnings in the porno industry, continuing a story begun in **When the Dancing Stops**. The plot opens with two flashbacks, the first having to do with a 16-year-old ghost, Liza, who lived in Allie and Brett's new house some 30 years ago. The second has to do with 16-year-old Storm, who auditioned for Brett as an exotic dancer five years earlier. Both teens were sexually and physically abused, as was Brett.

Brett Higgins, a former underworld figure, fell in love with 17-year-old Allie, with whom, six years later, she has moved to a small town in Michigan under an assumed identity to take up a new and reformed—and boring—life.

> She missed the excitement of her old life, missed going out and recruiting dancers, ordering and negotiating items for the bookstores to sell, always having to be on the alert in case their competitors or the fuzz were watching her, and she missed walking through the theater and having the naked dancers walk up to her and flirt with her. (10)

This is about power and how the porno industry and its underworld confer power on the disempowered, whether the victim is a boss like Brett or a dancer like Storm. Even Allie, seemingly unabused but born female, attains power by becoming a police officer.

Brett and Allie's new life contrasts vividly with the old when their neighbor Madeline invites them to a dinner of wheatball Stroganoff.

> Brett had spent years dealing with killers, drug dealers, money launderers and prostitutes, but already she knew Madeline Jameson had far more power in her tiny body than any of the former could ever dream of. (24)

Madeline is perhaps the most memorable and most important character in the novel. A spirited, eccentric old woman who teaches English and Women's Studies at the local college, she also is psychic and serves as a surrogate mother to Brett.

Before things get too boring for Brett as they rehab the old house, Liza's ghost tries to communicate with the new owners, misplacing a notebook and turning on lights that were off. Local contractors refuse to work on the house. Allie and Brett find a leather-bound journal with Liza's name on it, in which her father's abuse is revealed, and also her lesbian relationship with Jen. Liza's ghost visits Brett while she is feverish with a cold and under the influence of Nyquil. The storyline becomes a counterpoint of passages from the journal of Liza's life 30 years earlier and present-day events.

One of the older workers reveals that Liza had been murdered in this house and that her lover Jen was wrongfully imprisoned for it. As told by her former boyfriend, Liza's ghost pulls covers from anyone who tries to sleep in the house, beginning with her own twin sister: "Elise. She wrote me a few times from Colorado, saying she could finally sleep again. When she was here, somebody kept opening windows and stealing her covers" (55).

This is an obvious stroke of therapese. Also, lest we miss the picture, other connections are spelled out, perhaps unnecessarily, as the astute reader will have already divined the overlapping of identities.

> Brett glanced at the picture of Liza beside one article and gasped. With her long dark hair and sorrowful eyes, with her youth and naiveté, she looked much like Storm, the old lover Brett had been unable to save, the lover that the mysterious vision in her living room had reminded her of. (60)

Such overt explanations obscure the artfulness that could be there.

The plot then gives way to machination when the location of the town Brett and Allie escape to is chosen by throwing a dart at a map, landing on the town of Alma, of course. Thus Brett and Allie wind up in the same house in which Liza was murdered. When it turns out that Brett was born precisely at the same time Liza was murdered, the coincidence stretches credibility.

Regarding Brett's motivation to solve the mystery of Liza's death and set her ex-lover free, no further explanations are needed. But the reader is subjected again to a tedious narrative:

> The pictures of Jen and Liza caught Brett's attention. Jen always looked at Liza with love, and as the album's story went on the photos showed Liza returning the feelings. Obviously, these two women had been very much in love and very happy together. These pictures added further fuel to Brett's need to see Jen freed of the charges. (92)

But the most grievous error in the book is that this is no mystery. The reader will know from the get-go who actually did the killing. **When the Dead Speak** is a suspense story, facilitated by a psychic's seance, but not a mystery. The overexplaining could be attributed to the fact that author Szymanski is a playwright and perhaps not as familiar with the way the mystery genre's subtleties can be used to engage the reader's imagination.

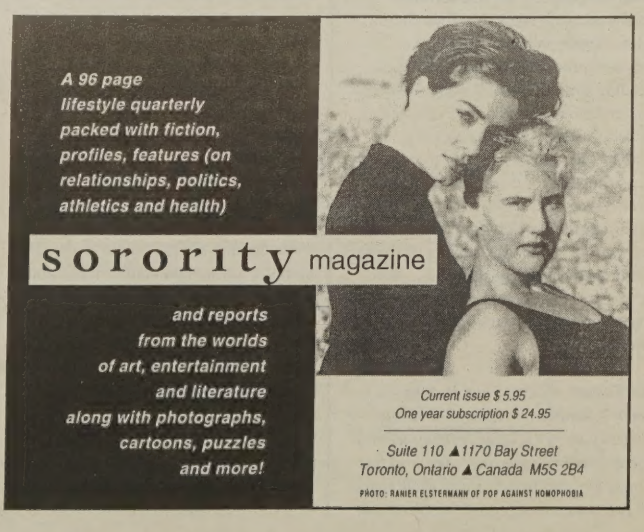
On the other hand, the complexities of Brett Higgins's character are interesting, even if she is not the most likable protagonist to visit lesbian literature. Brett is the kind of butch you might fantasize about in a hot moment but would never actually date; the kind of butch fathers dread their daughters might bring home. (However, in Szymanski's first book, **When the Dancing Stops**, Brett's attempts to win the trust of Allie's mother and father become the seeds of her reformation, however unlikely the event.) Some of the scenes are not pleasant to read; but the etiology of the effects of abuse on its victims is real—how they have been conditioned to associate rough sex with love, for example, and must attempt to regain their power, often by seduction of someone else in a position of authority.

The story might have been better served if the tired cliché of Liza's ghost being portrayed by a cold draft was omitted. Ditto for the overdone no-no of describing a character by having her look in the mirror (16). Also, the depiction of a former witness's credibility about his dating the murdered Liza strikes a stereotypical and false note: "I think it's a load of bullshit. Jeffie is a real momma's boy—I doubt he's ever gotten laid, or ever will" (93). This dialogue is attributed to Allie, whose character up to this point does not support this attitude.

Overall, however, the characters are believable, and Brett becomes the instrument of redemption for both young women, an atonement it would seem for her own former sins of misusing power in the porno industry.

When the Dead Speak sure beats some of the less substantive offerings in our lesbian lit, but an honest reviewer has to wonder if readers will be there to listen. ❖❖❖

__Pele Plante__ is a contributor to __Off the Rag__, a menopause anthology, writes short stories for __Lesbian Short Fiction__, and is working on a new novel, __Parallel Tracks__. She lives on the beautiful Oregon Coast.



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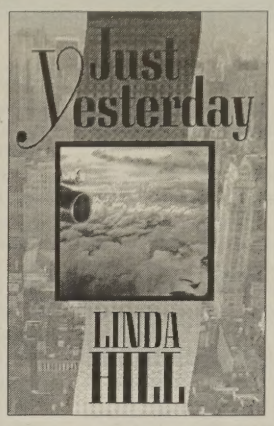

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by Linda Hill

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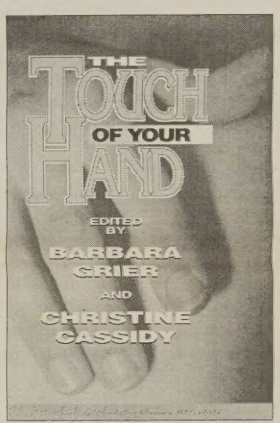

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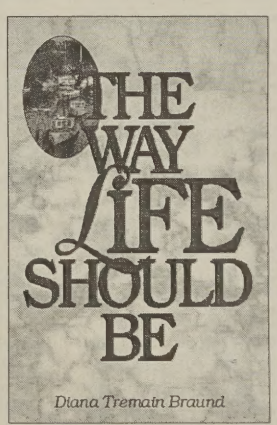

THE WAY LIFE SHOULD BE

by Diana Tremain Braund

Jennifer Ogden leaves her unfaithful partner and accepts a job as Assistant District Attorney in Bailey's Cove, Maine.

Kristan Cassidy, headstrong reporter, is as rugged and free as the Maine coastline she calls home. Having been burned in the past, she believes there's no room for romance in her life until she realizes that she's falling hard for Jennifer.

Pam Rivers, Jennifer's seductive ex-lover, has her heart set on a permanent reconciliation. When she discovers that another woman is interested in Jennifer, her competitive instincts shift into overdrive.

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WINDROW GARDEN

by Janet McClellan

As a bitter January wind whips through Leavenworth County, Kansas, Sally Windrow is preparing for another hectic year of farming. Unfortunately, her hired hand and chief mechanic is seriously injured in an accident. Frantic because all the skilled labor in the region has already hired on at other farms, Sally puts an ad in the local paper — hoping against hope that a good man will turn up.

To Sally's surprise, her ad is answered by Nicole Jaeger, desperately trying to make sense of her life and find a place to start over. As the women work side-by-side Sally and Nicole's business relationship blossoms into a trusted friendship that will nurture the seeds of love hidden deep within their lonely hearts.

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PAST DUE

A Detective Inspector Carol Ashton Mystery

by Claire McNab

Reproductive specialist Dr. Brin Halstead has made quite a name for himself. To admirers the charismatic doctor is a visionary, his Halstead Clinic at the cutting edge of genetic research, but a breaking scandal has begun to paint a very different picture of a dangerous fanatic playing with his patient's lives — and the laws of nature.

When Halstead's body is discovered, brutally bludgeoned and burnt, Detective Inspector Carol Ashton must follow the bloody trail down a slippery slope of greed, corruption, and murder.

ISBN: 1-56280-217-8 $11.95

FIFTH WHEEL

A Cassidy James Mystery

by Kate Calloway

A sadistic serial killer is abducting young women and leaving their mutilated bodies along Oregon's coastal highway. Kings Harbor police–woman Martha Harper believes the clues lead to a local college. Desperate for help, she turns to her best friend, Cassidy James.

Posing as an assistant in the Theater Department, she finds herself surrounded by a cast of intriguing characters, including the alluring Professor Lauren Monroe, whose talents are not limited to the classroom. The more she learns about Lauren and the people around her, the more Cassidy suspects she's not the only one playing a role. . . .

ISBN: 1-56280-218-6 $11.95

A Taste for Murder

by Melissa Hartman

Wicked Games by Ellen Hart. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, 356 pp., $24.95 cloth. ISBN 0-312-18680-0.

Wicked Games, the seventh mystery featuring Minneapolis restaurateur and amateur sleuth Jane Lawless, is sure to delight the ranks of Ellen Hart fans. The series has been nominated for the Lambda Award five times (**Robber's Wine** garnering the prize in 1996). Now murder and mayhem come closer to home than ever before—under Jane Lawless's own roof.

Along with Jane, owner of the Lyme House Restaurant in Minneapolis; Cordelia Thorn, Jane's closest friend and Minneapolis's reigning diva; and Julia Martinsen, Jane's love interest, the main cast of characters this time includes successful businesswoman Virginia Kastner; her gold-digger second husband Otto; Patricia Kastner, their daughter and Jane's wealthy new neighbor; Jane's tenant Elliot Beauman, Virginia's son by a previous marriage; and Earl Wilcox, private investigator.

Once again, Jane finds herself in the midst of a killing spree, this time the result of a family tragedy that befalls the Kastners, described in the flashback that opens the book. Happily enjoying a beautiful summer evening and contemplating the first real flush of business success, Virginia witnesses a devastating accident to her ten-year-old son, Jay. The next 350 pages explore the ramifications of this tragedy.

Fast-forward to Minneapolis, present day. Jane, having achieved considerable career success, is still struggling to come to terms with the death of her partner of ten years, Christine. Jane's new relationship is with a mostly-absent lover, Dr. Julia Martinsen. Jane is introduced to the Kastner clan when promiscuous, bisexual Patricia, portrayed as the "classic rich kid" (39), buys the most expensive home in Jane's upscale neighborhood. Patricia's principal pastimes include working out with her personal trainer and flirting with Jane, who resists Patricia's persistent advances, resolving instead to turn her into a friend.

But Patricia's most recent boyfriend has died under mysterious circumstances, and her brother Elliot, a writer and illustrator of children's books, decides to return to his hometown, better known as *Murderapolis*, "the murder capital of the Upper Midwest," to keep an eye on her (7). In addition to the change in locale, Elliot is in transition professionally as well: "As a writer—even a widely published children's book author—he hadn't yet made it financially" (7). And, as we soon learn, Elliot has problems other than figuring out how to comfort his sister. A murder has been committed, and he needs to tell someone. The twist is, he claims he hasn't witnessed the crime, only *visualized* it. Elliot's a psychic—or is he? This is a main mystery of **Wicked Games**: Is Elliot Beauman truly telepathic, or does he know more than he's telling?

Elliot lands on Jane's doorstep and becomes her new renter, taking the efficiency apartment that formerly was Christine's office, converted after her untimely death from cancer. At the threshold of his new digs, he reveals a glimpse of how difficult it's been to make the journey home:

> Elliot had solved the problem of his family's code by banishing himself, though he still generally abided by the rules. It was simple expediency. He loved his sister far too much to leave her alone, unprotected, in a family of smiling monsters. But then, as his sister often pointed out, Elliot saw monsters everywhere. He even wrote about them, drew them, making them seem benign, occasionally humorous. What was a monster, really, but an unhappy, misunderstood creature who, if anyone cared to look, was actually quite lovable? In cartoonland, it was always that way. But in real life, Elliot didn't buy it. The reason was fairly pragmatic. Deep down, Elliot knew he was a card-carrying member of his own family, a monster of extraordinary proportions. (35)

Filled with trepidation, he finally steps into the room:

> Inside, it was pitch dark. Elliot fumbled around on the wall until he found a switch. Flipping it on, the room burst into focus. For a moment he couldn't breathe. He took it all in, yet didn't move an inch away from the door. The ghosts were here, all right, their fists clenched, their eyes slits of rage. "I'm not going to listen to this crap!" he shouted. "Stop it!" (36)

Despite the misplaced modifier (Flipping it on, *the room* . . .) this is some of the book's most highly effective writing. As a *sensitive*, someone highly receptive to psychic functioning, Elliot's response to his ghostly roomies makes sense—or does it? Perhaps he's a nut case, out of place in the world of reality, as suggested by how out of place he seems in the novel: Can a straight male with a taste for canned ravioli, Mountain Dew, and Miracle Whip, and who owns a cat named Cain, ever adapt to life in the lesbian world of **Wicked Games**, with true pet-worshippers and foodies abounding?

When Elliot gains notoriety in the local newspaper as the psychic son of a wealthy businesswoman, a mysterious truck with Iowa license plates shows up in the neighborhood. It belongs to ex-English-teacher-turned-private-eye Earl Wilcox, who has been hired by the mother of Patricia's late boyfriend. She's uneasy about the ruling of her son's death as a suicide and is convinced he was murdered. Earl reaches out to Jane, asking her to provide him any information she thinks pertinent about Patricia Kastner.

Jane then embarks on a full-scale investigation of the circumstances surrounding Patricia's boyfriend's death, finding that Patricia's former lover, a married male college professor, died under uncannily similar circumstances. The finger is pointing Patricia's way—or is it? Both Virginia and Otto, her mother and father, have their own reasons for doing in their daughter's boyfriends. Because of her sexual, social, and financial improprieties they stand to lose prestige—and a good deal of money.

This is one tightly plotted murder mystery, and, for the most part, it is smoothly and cleverly-written:

> This was the first crack Jane had ever seen in Patricia's carefully projected competent, in-control image. Patricia wore her self-confidence the way some women wore perfume. It was always there in the air, sometimes just a hint, sometimes overpowering. (45)

> When Patricia entered Della's Bar late Friday evening—dressed to kill—or at least to wound—she gazed dispassionately around the room for a few seconds, examining the clientele, gauging how best to handle her next move. (286)

If **Wicked Games** falters, ultimately, it's in the characterization; at times, the players are in danger of becoming stock, or flat. They say the things we might expect them to say, and in vague terms. For example, when Jane questions "the trim and healthy" doctor Julia about why she is so taciturn about her life, Julia replies, "Are you really interested in blood disorders? If I talked to you about standard versus experimental treatments, wouldn't your eyes glaze over?" (164, 168). When Jane asks her sister-in-law Sigrid, a marriage and family therapist, her opinion about whether the family environment can trigger violence, Sigrid replies:

> "The problem is, we become violent toward our intimates—our lovers, friends, spouses, children—because few other people in our lives can anger us so much. Families may be the main source of our pleasure, but they can also be the main source of our pain." (224)

The tendency to cast characters in stock molds extends even to Patricia, a textbook (from the seventies) bisexual who doesn't give a hoot about the sex of her partner. Cruising a local bar, she attempts to pick up a butch number. When that doesn't work, she goes on to aggressive sex play with a pretty boy (that seems to work).

The clearest character disappointment is, however, Jane Lawless herself, and that is a shame, because the author has plenty with which to work. Jane enters the book in an unexciting way, lying in bed reminiscing about life since Christine's death: "Some of the highs and lows were missing now, but life once again seemed good" (18). It's as though psychotropic meds have flatlined her personality. Characters who serve as moral filters often exhibit that same evenness of temperament, but here it's not quite effective. Jane's friend Cordelia, remembering the way Jane anesthetized herself with alcohol after Christine's death, gives a clue how the author might resuscitate this character with a dose of self-awareness:

> [I]t all came back to her: the drinking. The anger. The terrible, inconsolable sadness. Perhaps Jane didn't remember that awful time as clearly as she did because she was unconscious during a good part of it. (330)

The point is, all along Jane Lawless is portrayed as too smart a woman to remain *unconscious* about anything around her. We are led to believe that she is ripe for reemergence into the living, breathing, emotional world of those willing, though perhaps not yet ready, to heal from grief. But if she really *isn't* ready, why does she embark on a new love relationship?

The author's seeming casualness over Jane's character motivation is evident early in the book, when P.I. Earl draws from her the reason she may want to be involved in the Kastner investigation: that her personal and professional life leaves something to be desired. It's interesting that when he asks why she likes to do these investigations, her first answer is unequivocally ambivalent: "'Actually . . . I'm not sure.'" Then she goes on to confess:

> ". . . Something is missing. The passion I used to feel isn't there anymore. The funny thing is, when I work on these . . . investigations, as you call them . . . I feel engaged in a way I used to feel at the restaurant. And occasionally, it's even gone beyond that. I'm *consumed* by the chase. I used to think it was just simple curiosity, but it goes way beyond that." (81)

It's puzzling why Jane reveals that her motivation to involve herself with murder—the quintessence of evil—comes from boredom at finding herself overqualified to fill the plates of the yuppies of Minneapolis. Even if Hart isn't comfortable letting the words "I investigate murders to help other people" slip from her heroine's lips, why not at least hint that there is a deeper, more obvious, more humane way of explaining the modus operandi of Jane Lawless? Directly after this very important conversation with Earl, Jane reflects, "It felt strange to be talking to Earl so intimately, telling him something *she'd never explained to anyone before*" (82, emphasis added). Perhaps this may be a theme ripe for exploration in the next Jane Lawless mystery?

But then again, why subject a mystery novel to the test of satisfactory character development? Shouldn't it be beside the point why the sleuth is drawn to solve crimes? Not when, I maintain, the sleuth seems on the very verge of realizing her full human potential.

As a former big-city dweller, I've had my fill of crime right outside my front door, thank you very much, and most mystery stories, I confess, make me a tad nervous. The prospect of allowing myself to be entertained *solely* by the plot—murder—is, well, sort of upsetting. And as a devoted reader, I also find it disconcerting to be snookered into falling in love with certain key characters only to find out they're homicidal maniacs. So I count on the heroine—the sleuth—to take me through the horror with complete confidence, consciousness, and, yes, style. For me, the test of her character *is* the measure of the book. All this may not be entirely fair to authors whose mystery novels I'm assigned to critique. On the other hand, it may be entirely fair to readers. And, when you come to think of it, to whom must the reviewer answer?❖

***Melissa Hartman**'s short fiction is recently anthologized in **Dancing in the Dark** and **The First Time Ever**; her poetry appears in **Interim** and **The Southern California Anthology**, and she serves as associate editor of **Lesbian Short Fiction**. She is also the author of a novel, **The Sure Thing** (Naiad, 1994).*

It's a Mystery

Under Cover

by Ruth Burke

Over the Line by Tracey Richardson. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1998, 168 pp., $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-56280-202-X.

The second Stevie Houston mystery is set mostly in a small town by the name of Shelton on the U.S./Canadian border, where Stevie, who is a Metro Toronto Police detective, goes underground to solve a cop murder—one of two from the same small force.

Harding Scott, en route from Shelton to Toronto to visit his cardiologist, has a heart-stopping experience on Stevie's turf in a carjacking that is perhaps not what it seems. Then Stevie's lover, forensic pathologist Jade Agawa-Garneau, is asked to review the autopsy findings of the four-year-old demise of Shelton Detective Gina Walters, who, given the way she was found, would have had to have been a contortionist to have shot herself but was officially declared a suicide—perhaps because she was a lesbian.

Could Scott and Walters have been working on something big—perhaps the same something? The late detective Walters's lover, Dana Jeffries, says that her cop had said so and that after the investigation was over, the detective had said that she was going to find a new career, as she was disenchanted with police work. Stevie and her partner Ted Jovanowski are on the carpet, so to speak, at the beginning, as Stevie has goofed up a case big time. So if they don't solve Harding Scott's murder, Ted will face early retirement and Stevie will be going with the flow of traffic.

Taking her dead twin's identity for the time being, Stevie infiltrates the Shelton police force as a rookie constable and finds that the cops regularly use the firing ranges of a civilian—rich guy Bradley Alsop, a fisherman's son who still remembers how to cast the nets and bring in the big ones and who, it seems, is a computer importer.

Jade is a lot less than happy about Stevie's dangerous undercover work, but she gets over it, and there is a lot of undercover work of a different sort involved in the making up, too.

Not all of the danger is from flying bullets, although Stevie earns a hospital stay at the end, for she finds that although a female cop is not on the take, she certainly is on the make, and Stevie worries that her turndown will be taken for homophobia, when it is really safety and monogamy that she has in mind.

There are some mysteries within this mystery story. Why is the drug-addicted prostitute Kelly Bronskill seemingly immune from arrest—especially when she solicits in front of the cops? Then, too, what is the story of the fingerprints that weren't left by human hands?

There are some deftly worded phrases in **Over the Line**. One, on page 21, goes like this: "Her hand slid down the front of her shirt, tauntingly relieving another button of its task." Then, on page 77, we read, "It was no doubt raining again in Jeffries' heart, but not pouring."

A minor flaw—although it may not seem so to many readers—is the gratuitous amount of profanity in the story. Maybe cops talk that way—and under pressure many of the rest of us do too—but could the story have been told just as well without it?

The main characters aren't cardboard, although some of the others may be interchangeable. Stevie, we are told on page 26, is "handsomely masculine. moody, aggresive." Her triceps are in good condition, too, but she doesn't break her leash when Jade sometimes gets a bit provoked and calls her Tex. Of course, the good-to-eat doctor is an exotic morsel, being French and Ojibwa Indian. Partner Ted, somewhat depressed and recovering from a heart attack and whose wife divorced him eons ago, is gay-friendly where Stevie and Jade are concerned and considers them family—as well as Family—and doesn't tattle on them to the department.

As a supposedly new-to-the-cop-game officer, given a uniform that doesn't fit, Stevie is treated as a go-fer by her cruiser partner, who expects her to pay for the coffee. Then, inside the mandatory doughnut shop, she meets an emotional retard who, as she stands in line and he grabs his crotch, mocks her, saying, "Hey, I know how come girls want to be cops. They want to carry a gun 'cause they don't got one-a these" (65). However, she gets the last line and the laughs as she retorts, "You're right. If I had what you had . . . I wouldn't need to carry a pistol. I'd need a bloody cannon" (66).

It is refreshing that this book is demographically correct as regards sexual orientation. Ted asks, "So, like, you two just don't like men or what?" (26), and Jade explains "It's not that we don't like men, Ted. Have we ever made you feel that we dislike you?" Ted continues, "No, you haven't. . . . It's just, why would you pick, you know, women? Like what's wrong with men?" Then Jade sums it up with, "And it's not as though you hate men, right? You just don't want to sleep with them" (27).

You will learn some new ways of doing things, as for example when Jade sneaks into Shelton so that she and Stevie can have some private undercover workings, Stevie's nose gets pushed out of shape and Jade gets a package of frozen corn for a compress (101), which doesn't deter the frolicsome partners from their playtime.

Readers whose romance is all in their minds or who are their own lovers will get information on how to keep their hand in, as will couples who need more fantasy fuel. For instance, we read,

> Jade was not to be cheated. She wanted to taste Stevie, to revel in her scent, in the plush wetness. And she did, her tongue exploring every slick crevice and protrusion while two of her fingers slipped inside Stevie. (107)

❖❖❖

***Ruth Burke** lives in Arizona with her life partner, Juanita. She is a graduate of East L.A. College and San Diego State University and is now and then a graduate student at Western New Mexico University. In the distant past she was a magazine editor in New York City.*

Love 'n Murder

by Charlotte Sharke

Gonna Take a Homicidal Journey by Sandra Scoppettone. New York: Little, Brown, 1998, 240 pp., U.S. $22.95. ISBN 0-316-77665-3.

I consider lesbian detective Lauren Laurano an old friend—predictable, entertaining, and lovable. Scoppettone's fifth book in the Lauren Laurano series, **Gonna Take a Homicidal Journey**, picks up where the fourth book left off. Lauren and Kip, her partner of many years, are going through hell on wheels because Lauren cheated on Kip at the end of the fourth book, **Let's Face the Music and Die**. I mention the love relationship first in this review because romance seems as important as murder in this novel. However, seeing as how this is a piece of detective fiction, I will discuss the murder first and the love second.

Our work-obsessed and computer-addicted Laurano is finally on holiday in Seaview on the North Fork of Long Island with Kip and Jill and Jenny (close "couple" friends). Jill and Jenny want to remodel their just-purchased "handywoman's dream" home on the North Fork. However, Lauren can't take a vacation when Bill Moffat, a Seaview local, turns up dead, hanging from a tree. Even though the local authorities insist Bill took his own life, Lauren gets hired to crack "The Case of the Man Who Couldn't Have Committed Suicide."

Of course, the local authorities aren't to be trusted. This a small town, and we X-philes all know what goes on in tiny close-knit communities. It is precisely this stereotype of the "small town with a dreadful secret" that makes the plot easy to figure out. Conspiracy among powerful men in town is obvious from page 45. Nevertheless, Scoppettone does make a feminist criticism of the institutionalized sexism and racism in the local government and judicial system. For example, the police do nothing about a stalker (103) and sexual assaults on children (123). Moreover, white cops have questioned only blacks in relation to a murder case that has little to do with the black community (65). This book is concerned with the lack of justice in a white and male-dominated town, yet the criticism seems simplistic. Almost all men in power are bad: crooked cops, an immoral mayor, a tainted politician, and a greedy medical examiner. Most men in power are on the payroll of an exploitative group (can't name it). However, perhaps the problem of corrupt mainstream systems in real life still needs to be depicted in fiction because these systems of power aren't changing much.

Lauren not only is forced to solve a murder case on her holiday but also experiencing major relationship chaos. The first line of the new book is Kip's snarky comment: "If you hate it so much here [on holiday], go back to town to your little girlfriend" (3). At the end of the fourth book, Kip caught Lauren smooching with Alex, a nubile young thing. The first chapter of this book revisits the fourth book's final revelation scene but adds a discussion about affairs. Kip and Lauren argue over what causes infidelity and whether a true, trusting relationship can be rebuilt after an affair. No mention of a murder until after eight pages of heavy relationship stuff. Of course, we get the dead body at the end of the first chapter, but really, the entire "murder/conspiracy" plot seems weaker and less important than the "lesbian-relationship-in-crisis" subplot. In fact, the novel asks poignant "after-the-affair" questions, such as, What if the person regrets causing the partner pain but doesn't regret the affair?

It is precisely these relationship questions that I find most intriguing. This novel scrutinizes monogamous long-term relationships. Lauren believes that she wants to remain with Kip, but she wonders if she wants the relationship to go back to the way it was before the affair. Lauren admits,

> There were some wonderful things and there were plenty of not-so-terrific factors. We glided over our problems, made jokes, looked the other way. Why did I disappear into my computer, as Kip accuses me of doing? And why did she simply vanish? Was it her brother's death, as I thought? . . . The thought of being without Kip frightens and saddens me so much. We're tense and the fun has gone out of our couplehood. But should we stay together if we're not happy? (120)

Lauren's reflections on her relationship take up a great part of the novel, and I enjoy hearing her confusion because I can relate to it. Scoppettone doesn't "neatly" solve relationship problems by the end of the novel; in fact, her endings resist closure in the love plot, even if there is closure in the murder plot.

The viability of long-term relationships is also discussed within a straight context. For example, Jean Ashton is the woman who hires Lauren to figure out who killed her cousin Billy, and while Lauren and Jean chat, Jean questions whether a long-term marriage is "unnatural":

> Well, there are so many things that happen during those years, so many unspoken hurts and slights. Not to mention the sheer knowledge of the other person, the predictableness of it all. How can two people keep things fresh or interesting that long? I don't think it's possible. (30)

Of course, Jean's perspective is influenced by her own claustrophobic and lonely rich life. Another straight character, Peter Cecchi, discusses his thoughts on trust in a "marriage." Cecchi, a close friend of Lauren's, insists that he has not broken Annette's (his wife's) trust by revealing the fact that Annette had an affair because she doesn't know that he told Lauren about it. Lauren concludes, "Is that what trust is about then? Whether the other person knows what you've done or said? I think the bottom line is that trust relies a lot on what a person can get away with" (135). Nevertheless, as much as I enjoy these questions, I find them problematic. Because Scoppettone discusses both het and lesbian long-term relationships in the same framework, there is a danger of erasing the differences between them in

order to focus on the similarities. Perhaps Scoppettone wants to convince a het reader that, hey, lesbians aren't so different after all. This erasure of difference occurs when Lauren states that the lack of legalized gay marriages encourages lesbian and gay relationships to be transitory and "that's why people move on to the next one all the time, especially those of us [read gays and lesbians] who can't get married legally. It's so easy" (99). Lauren is suggesting that gay relationships might last longer if only they had the privileges of straight ones. Granted, having access to equal legal "marriage" status is desirable to some lesbians. However, Lauren is not questioning whether there are flaws in the institution of marriage itself that queers might want to challenge. Lesbian relationships are being talked about within a heterosexual framework that seems to limit the dialogue.

One of the most appealing aspects of the Lauren Laurano series is Lauren's forthright character. Lauren is the kind of woman who occasionally admits her flaws. For example, when four women are living together on holiday, Lauren admits that household chores have to be assigned because "basically, I don't like to do anything" (19). She is a woman after my own lazy heart. Some humorous dialogue and narration makes me laugh aloud, whereas other comic attempts fall flat. For example, I love the line about Kip doing a martyr walk (25) when she is upset that Lauren took a job offer on their holiday. You can hear the guilt trip in each of Kip's footsteps. However, the humor of Theo continually barking because Jenny cannot control the dog (22) has been used in an earlier novel.

In this book, Scoppettone decides to experiment with a new narrative perspective for the Laurano series. In Chapter 5, we suddenly switch from Lauren's engaging first-person voice to a third-person voice inside Jean Ashton's head. This narration adds excitement and new information regarding the case, but we learn too much too quickly. Through secondary characters' thoughts, we learn information before Lauren does. Even though we are exposed to more red herrings, the already predictable "mystery" becomes easier to solve. I knew who one of the murderers was far before the end of the novel; and halfway through the book (96), we know that a —— is running this sick town, which makes me think that this book really isn't about the mystery at all. It is more of an exploration of crisis in a lesbian relationship and a manifesto against institutionalized male power.

On the other hand, the change in narration gave me a strong emotional reaction to secondary characters. I had empathy for the isolation of a woman who so desperately needs something to fill up her life that a visit with a detective is a major social event (158). Moreover, the narrative change suggested that there were many loose ends about characters and that it was difficult to truly "know" people.

One weakness of this novel is the character development of the criminals. One perp has an obnoxious personality. He is the stereotypical misogynist who believes all women "are alike" and who hates his sons for turning "out like their mother. Stupid and useless" (44). The reader dislikes his cruel, sexist character from the start. It is easy but problematic to cast a criminal as a devilish "sharp-toothed" (43) inhuman monster, as is typical in detective fiction. When murderers become animals, the author sets up an "us and them" perspective. "We" civilized good people couldn't possibly ever become "inhuman" monsters who murder. Granted, I recognize that Scoppettone is revealing the dangers of a sexist society that teaches males to be misogynists. Moreover, she is firmly placing sexual abuse within the realm of woman-hating.

A strength of the novel is Scoppettone's explorations of the correlation between representation and reality. We live in such a media dominated culture that characters continually confuse Lauren, a detective, with "the media" (108). Fiction and reality have become so conflated that people can only understand reality through fiction. Characters can only understand Lauren's detective work based on what they have watched on TV. People believe that they know what private investigators do because the media has shown them the "truth" about detection. Similarly, the media's "truth" about lesbians is questioned on page 170. Lauren and Kip joke about combing each other's hair because "on the few occasions that lesbians have been portrayed on television they've been shown combing each other's hair. Something I doubt anyone does" (170). There is an inherent critique here not to believe everything you read and hear about lesbians. However, does that critique extend to this book? Or are Scoppettone's lesbians real "authentic" lesbians? I wonder if Scoppettone is being satirical and suggesting that there is no one definition—or representation—of a true lesbian.

Finally, this book is about destruction. The novel's epitaph from Eugene Ionesco states: "Nothing holds together, everything falls apart." Ironically, even though the town's sexist destructive system has "fallen apart," the lesbian relationship remains together (if unsteadily). Perhaps the novel's end fulfills my desire for justice: corrupt systems fall to pieces and lesbian love can conquer all.

❖❖❖

***Charlotte Sharke** loves reading lesbian detective fiction curled up in her bright home with sunshine walls in Ontario's idyllic Kawartha region. For fun, she dances to disco music and teaches high school English.*

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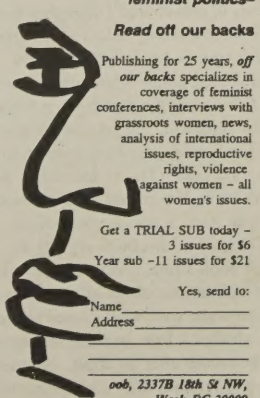

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Arc of Love

by Donna Allegra

Rhythm Tide by Frankie J. Jones. Tallahassee, FL: The Naiad Press, Inc., 1998, 145 pp., U.S. $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-56280-189-9.
By Reservation Only by Jackie Calhoun. Tallahassee, FL: The Naid Press, Inc., 1998, 219 pp., U.S. $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-56280-191-0.

Cosmic joke: I'm a radical feminist who gobbles romance novels. Heaven help me in this dance with the devil; the genre's heterosexual incarnation is designed for the sole purpose of narcotizing misguided women. Yet the lesbian romance is seeded with potential to undermine heterosexism.

Lesbian love stories may be the last bastion where a seeker can find actual lesbian content. We live in an age of "gendered studies" that ignore feminism, "queers" who find women-only spaces irrelevant, and Hollywood portrayals of lesbians as women who sleep with men. This leaves lesbian romance novels as one of the few realms where we are welcome to deal with our primary concern—loving other women.

Rhythm Tide is Frankie J. Jones's maiden voyage with The Naiad Press, the foremost proponent of lesbian romances. Presenting the story of a woman who comes to lesbianism at mid-life, Jones relentlessly recounts the abuse Clara Webster suffers at the hands of her husband and two teenage sons. In keeping with the sophisticated and highly advanced mating rituals of heterosexuals, Clara met her husband when she was a shy college student. Flattered by his interest, "Two months later they were married" (34). Hm. And people make jokes about dykes and U-hauls?

Twenty years later, Clara thinks she's crazy because Allen, the husband from hell, has persistently told her so. Jones's depiction of Clara's conditioning to heterosexuality can feel heavy-handed for anyone whose basic feminism is familiar with that continuing saga of oppression.

Clara leaves her home in Louisiana intending suicide but is rescued by Randi Kosub, a 45-year-old painter. During their days together, Clara discovers freedom of self and a desire to live, thanks to Randi's encouraging support. Clara's struggle against her social conditioning is as important as the emerging love story.

Laughter and easy companionship bring the women to a point where they are in a state of attraction/desire/infatuation—or whatever is the proper name for what women feel in the name of love. Randi and Clara share their first kiss over a weekend stay in the home of Randi's friends. What locates this scene and the whole of **Rhythm Tide** in the pleasuably erotic emotions of romance is the fact that Randi and Clara "have to" stop when friends catch them kissing. Fulfillment continually eludes the pair.

Later that evening, Clara and Randi have their first sex. Given Clara's history, the reader can imagine the keen pleasure of having a woman's mouth suckle your honey tree for the first time. We know that Allen would never even sniff Clara's sugar bush.

The next day, Clara learns that one of her sons has been in a car accident and she must return home. **Rhythm Tide** is built on frequent moments of *romanticus interruptus*, a strategy that stokes the reader's erotic response.

Randi accompanies Clara to Louisiana, and Allen discovers the lovers in an embrace that tells all. Allen threatens Clara with loss of her children. Author Jones knows well her audience has knows the usual outcome for lesbians involved in heterosexual custody battles. The stakes are high, and Clara caves in to fear of Allen as well as her desire to protect Randi from a scorned male—and we know how viciously dangerous they are.

Surprisingly, once Clara, at Allen's behest, asks Randi to leave, she doesn't submit to wifedom. In revenge, Allen effectively alienates their sons from her. Defying Allen and anguishing over Randi, Clara once again takes on life anew, this time as a lesbian.

As is true in life, it takes quite a while for a woman to get out of the grip of heterosexual training. Clara doesn't return to Randi. Her reasons have to do with her sense of integrity and because she lacks the backbone to stake a claim for her heart's desire. This characterization gives reason for Clara and Randi to remain separated, but it reads like the author is fudging to support a weak plot.

To keep the sex scenes coming, Jones presents Clara with some very 1990s affairlets. She engages in an episode of phone sex as part of a long-distance relationship with her boss. Please: don't try that at home, girls.

Throughout this acquaintanceship sex, the reader is still holding out for the deeper love in Clara's heart. What many romance readers will find hot in this novel is the fact that Clara's yearning for Randi never fades. Randi and Clara finally arrive at their moment of true love's embrace only to have the scene interrupted by a "gorgeous blond" (sic, 126). Said blond takes possession of Randi, who remains silent while Clara beats a hasty retreat. Gee willikers, this business of fleeing on the assumption that one's beloved is involved with someone else is as corny as the 2:00 soap. Jones relies on other such old-timey devices to push the story, as when Clara must down alcohol to broach a difficult truth. But Jones is onto something romantically potent: **Rhythm Tide**'s frequent delayed sexual gratifications give it an edge of heat.

Randi's and Clara's longing for one another brings them together, and Clara makes the leap of courage she lacked earlier in the book. No longer the woman raised not to talk back to a man who bullied her, she takes a last stab at reaching out to her sons. Unfortunately, in this mother-child reunion, Clara caters to the homophobia when she assures her son, "Just because I'm gay doesn't mean either of you boys will be."

Clara leaves her job to returns to Randi, and the romance reader hears the magic words. "I can't play games," Randi said, "I want a forever relationship" (144).

With her next novel, I hope Frankie J. Jones takes lessons to deepen story from the pages of the old hands in the Naiad stable of authors that include sharp-shooters Catherine Ennis, Karin Kallmaker, Evelyn Kennedy and Penny

A Fine Romance

Hayes. Or, given the surface similiarities between **Rhythm Tide** and **By Reservation Only**, from Jackie Calhoun, who always throws a lot into her characters' situations.

Jackie Calhoun's works have always been grounded in her belief that the balance of life is not freighted entirely around one's lover. She is in a unique postion at Naiad, where, as a long-time reader, I get the feeling that editors cut anything which isn't lesbian love story. Happily this hasn't been so with Calhoun's body of work about women in the throes of major life changes. And in her ninth life with Naiad, Calhoun has made a sea change in her writing which morphs from a plodding beast to something that has both depth and the lightness of wings.

In **By Reservation Only**, Shelley Carpenter-Benson has inherited Pine Shores resort in northern Wisconsin. At age 47, Shelley attempts to make a go at managing that mixed blessing, a business of her own.

Calhoun sets up the contrasts between soon-to-be-ex-lovers Shelley and Jan. Their growing incompatibility is exemplified by Shelley's increasing love for country living in contrast to Jan who enjoys city life and lesbian-feminist activism in Milwaukee.

Calhoun doesn't specify exactly what the "multicultural diversity" that Jan loves in Milwaukee is made of. The reader has no doubt that this is not the author's area of expertise. My one remembrance of an African-American in a Calhoun novel, **Changes**, has him described as big and black and accompanied by a policeman.

The only multiculturalism Calhoun's sentiments invite are from wetlands surrounding the resort: blue herons, frogs, redwing blackbirds, kingfishers, whippoorwill gulls, cedar waxwings, golden eye ducks. This novel is filled with occasions of nature writing that describe a magical realm. "The sun hung blood-red over the trees in the west, staining the clouds purple and pink and the water crimson" (75). "Ragged wisps of fog rose like ghosts off the lake's surface" (45). ."The morning was cool and quiet, except for the birds. The smells of lake and pines, of junipers and sweet clover, blended to produce a heady fragrance" (44). "Beating down with a glittering intensity, the sun covered the water with a sheen of gold that hurt the eyes" (109).

This is planet earth? The outdoors is a whole new world as Calhoun describes the environs of northern Wisconsin. **By Reservation Only** is an eco-feminist's delight, with detail of flora and fauna and rural landscapes that bewilder the urban dweller and help delineate character.

In past novels, Calhoun has been dead on about the financial crunch ordinary folk live under. This lends a reality kick for the reader who appreciates low-key radical politics nestled between the pages of a romance novel, as when one character says, "'Oh yeah, I'm not going anywhere. I can't afford to'" (63).

Shelley struggles to keep the resort alive. The daily grind to eke out a living, which is compensated by small beautiful joys, is the realm in which most of us live.

Pine Shores resort, with its needs for repair and upkeep, creates problems for Shelley to handle throughout the course of the book. These problems credibly feed the ever-engaging plot because Pine Shores does not necessarily pay for itself—a surprise to Shelley. "The income barely keeps up with the expenses, Jan. Something is always in need of repair. Why does everything boil down to money?" (53). True dat, as we Black folks say in the city.

In part one of **By Reservation Only**, through Shelley we are introduced to the resort, which ultimately takes on a larger character than any of the people. In part two, we hear Emily's tale. Alhough given equal time to Shelley, Emily makes a less strong impression as the close third person narrative looks over her shoulder.

Emily comes around the Pine Shores offering friendship, not having acknowledged her attraction to Shelley—a familiar lesbian dynamic. The lovers' relationship rises slowly to the surface. Midway through the book we get the love scene where Shelley and Emily declare their mutual attraction.

For all the richness of the setting, the subplots, the characterizations with many facets, we're not given a soppy, giddy connection between Shelley and Emily. Yet the reader longing for love story has much to satisfy that yearning. Calhoun accurately charts the rhythms of a lovers relationship that are true to life and hence, more pleasurable.

Emily's and Shelley's sex scenes are short and not lingered over for the titillation of erotica buffs:

> She became lost in the kissing, willingly stalled, and Shelley had to lead her to the next stage. After they climaxed, she lay speechless at their having made love at all and would have gladly started over.
>
> Unbidden, the shyness returned. Their relationship had been altered. No longer were they just friends. (112)

Shelley and Emily become inexplicably off-base and avoid one another. "'Let me get this straight,' Ted said. 'You made a move on her, she went along with it, and you haven't seen each other since. Why?'" (122). Although I'd have liked more scene-setting to reveal the ins and outs of the fear-of-intimacy monster, Calhoun has caught enough of the beast by its tail that we get to view Shelley and Emily struggle to be or not to be a couple.

"They were talking about everything but what had set them at odds, but at least they were having a conversation again. It seemed to Emily as if they had never stopped" (124). This speaks to a more mature and adult arc of love than an easy landing happily ever after.

The story line comes to a close over a year later. The reader is left with a satisfied feeling that these characters and their lives will continue past the pages of the book. **By Reservation Only** is Calhoun's best in terms of the writing and the plotting. I've often wanted more excitement from her story situations, but I have to respect this work which is so multi-faceted about character that it deserves regard as literary fiction, not a quickie affair. ❖❖❖

*Donna Allegra is most recently published in **Does Your Mama Know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming-Out Stories** edited by Lisa L. Moore (Redbone Press); **Hot and Bothered: Short Short Fiction of Lesbian Desire** edited by Karen X. Tulchinsky (Press Gang); **Lesbian Travels: A Literary Companion**, edited by Lucy Jane Bledsoe (Whereabouts Press) and **MOM**, edited by Nisa Donnelly (Alyson).*

THE EROTIC LESBIAN

Under Cover

by Anne Kail

Pillow Talk: Lesbian Stories Between the Covers ed. Lesléa Newman. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1998, 295 pp., U.S. $12.95 paper. ISBN 1-55583-419-1.

Pillow Talk, edited by Lesléa Newman, the "lesbian nation's most prolific writer," really kept my attention. Whether reading it poolside during triple-digit Texas summer heat or while standing in line at the Social Security office, this collection of erotic lesbian stories turned me on!

This collection includes well-crafted stories by lesbian writers Katya Andreevna, Louise A. Blum, Rhomylly B. Forbes, Mary Diane Hausman, Judy MacLean, Mary Man'n, Lesléa Newman, Stephanie Rosenbaum, Jess Wells, and Barbara Wilson. Roberta Almerez, atara, Sally Bellerose, Cat MacDonald, Nilaja A. Montgomery-Akalu, Mariana Romo-Cardona, Elisa Ross, and Anne Seale also contributed stories. A contributor's notes section is included, which is interesting reading. The cover art for the paperback edition is quite attention grabbing: The image is Gustave Corbet's "The Slumber," 1866. In this book review, I discuss a sampling of the stories, those that caught my attention because of the subject matter or because of excellent writing.

Several stories, notably "A Friend of a Friend of Dorothy," "Down at Shules," and "Kolu, Revisited" depict politically correct behavior: the use of dental dams, lubricant, and latex gloves during lesbian sex.

In locales and writing styles these stories of lesbian sexual desire run the gamut . Lesbian lust happens in bars, bathroom stalls, and automobiles; while watching baseball or playing poker; at the seamstress studio, in kitchens and motel rooms, arranging kitchen magnets, on stage, while looking for the "G" spot. In a comic vein, "A Friend of a Friend of Dorothy's" by Roberta Almerez explores the intriguing idea of an aging divorcee "coming out" by using the services of a lesbian prostitute to teach her the art of lesbian lovemaking. What is it like to "buy" a woman?

In "Family" by Katya Andreevna, two young dykes, Robin and Katie, end up having voyeuristic, raw, graphic sex in a private viewing booth in the balcony of a gay male theatre in San Francisco's Castro district. Here is an excerpt:

> Suddenly the man let out a low howl. His come shot out in an arc and splashed on the glass partition. I leaned toward it, licking the glass, trying to taste him. Robin's arms circled my waist, her face and fingers still buried in my pulsing pussy. Shudders of delight crawled from my center up my spine. I let my voice go, and I too emitted a howl of pleasure before giving in to a cackle that rose up from deep within my belly. (14)

A surprising twist awaits the reader.

As background to her story, "Playball," about two lovers, Cassie and Leah, the writer atara uses sexy E-mails, baseball on TV, and friendly competition. During the baseball game, each time a run is scored, one item of clothing is removed, so whatever body parts are revealed can be toyed with accordingly. A rudimentary understanding of the game of baseball is helpful, but the sexual tension climaxes in a very lengthy, sensuous, and satisfying fist-fucking episode.

"Daffodils" by Sally Bellerose is a humorous, metaphorical tale about continuity in a relationship between two 55-year-old ex-lovers. The tie that binds them together is flowers growing in the garden during springtime. Bellerose's description of ripening daffodils as a metaphor for sexual excitement between Annie and her ex-lover is glorious writing.

Rhomylly B. Forbes's "Women's Rites" is set at a Womyn's Spirit Gathering. Elspeth needs to return a small labrys—a moonstone and silver pendant on a chain—to Rowan, the object of her desire. The story is about unrequited desire and then sexual fulfillment happening amid a backdrop of Goddess rituals.

"Le Main" is Julie Ann Gibeau's first published story. The characters are somewhat contrived but interesting. Buster, a "butch," is attracted to a "fem" college student whom she calls the French babe. The French babe wants Buster to use her hand to make love to her, hence the story's title. However, Buster has other ideas. The story contains a dichotomy—tenderness and vulnerability, yet incredibly rough sex and mutual self-loathing between Buster and another character, Sylvia. Sylvia is Buster's fat, blonde, casual "fuck."

There is an ethereal quality to Mary Diane Hausman's writing in "The Carousel." I was oblivious to my surroundings while reading it. Carousels are magical places. The heroine of the story, Jasmine, is a steadfast dyke of color who finds herself lusting after Greg, a male coworker. Are sleep deprivation and overwork causing her to question her sexuality? She goes to a deserted amusement park to sort out her feelings and encounters a mysterious woman riding a black steed with a red saddle, mounted on a circling carousel. Jasmine is seduced by the undulating rhythm of this vision. See whether Jasmine is dreaming.

In "Petal Sweat," Susan Kan uses the allure of febrile, sexual word games and the frivolity of magnetic letters stuck on a refrigerator door at a Boston abortion clinic as an interesting way of hooking the reader. In the employee dining room, Rhonda, a sexually naive nurse, experiences escalating, unrequited feelings of sexual yearning for a mysterious word-game player. The caliber of the word-game imagery is stunning:

> . . . to feel you finger my peach from behind then swim around lie on top urging my bedsprings to moan my petals to sweat honey take me please I want a heaving vision frantic as a summer storm. (100)

"Fantasy Vacation" by Sara King is about two lovers on a road trip who end up in a motel. They can't wait to get there so the party can begin. The way the sexual bondage scenes are written is extremely arousing.

"Down at Shug's" by Catherine Lundoff is a butch/fem sexual fantasy set in

a fleabag trucker dive. Pepper, a "butch" trucker, is attracted to Amy, a young, hot new Asian waitress, at the truck stop. She'll be able to teach her a thing or two, but the tables get turned on Pepper.

That's the plot, but what I really like is the cadence of speech, the witty repartee and banter Lundoff creates for her characters. Amy remarks, "If one more yahoo tells me how goddamn exotic I am and how he hears oriental gals make fine wives who know their place, I'll shoot him" (114).

"Come Friday" by Judy MacLean, set in San Francicsco and Berkeley, depicts Daria's mad dash to see Janine, a divorcee with a 12-year-old son Cody, whom she has known only a short while. Daria, who tirelessly works as a homeless rights advocate, has been celibate for over a year, and this might be her lucky weekend. Daria is thwarted at every turn by her own do-gooder tendencies and hellish traffic. This story deftly juggles the myriad issues facing lesbians with children and ex-spouses. Miscommunication and tensions can occur between potential lovers with families and heavy work responsibilities.

"Shadowboxer" by Mary Marin graphically illustrates a codependent, obsessive, sick relationship among a forty-year-old woman who has been taking boxing lessons and Illana, the younger photographer who initially wants to learn from her, and Illana's ex-lover, Elise. They begin a sensuous dance of violence and seduction. The relationship ends in resigned bitterness and betrayal.

The 40-year-old makes this wise observation:

> I remember that we were in a restaurant that night, the dimly lit kind where relationships often begin and decisions are made, usually impulsively, that will haunt you the rest of your life. All dimly lit restaurants are haunted houses, and though you may never return again to that place, a part of you stays forever fixed in that time, a ghost hovering over new lovers sitting where you once sat, making the same familiar promises:
>
> "I will love you forever."
>
> "I will never leave you."
>
> "This will never die." (146-147)

Briefly, "Crushed," written by Janet Mason, concerns Alicia's lust for Susan, which almost destroys her relationship with her life partner Roz. All three met at a women's studies conference many years before. It's about having a good thing and not appreciating it until you almost lose it permanently.

"Kolu Revisited" by Cat MacDonald is about rekindling a long-lost high school crush that was thwarted years ago. Celeste, now an educator, meets Kolu, now a medical researcher living in Oakland. They meet again in a jazz bar while home visiting their families. Now that they've become reacquainted, Celeste's desire for Kolu reignites. They consummate their love. Celeste's insecurities present some problems, but by the end of the story there is hope for this relationship to continue.

Nilaja A. Montgomery-Akulu's story, "The Doctor's Wife" is a fish-out-of-water tale. The writing and vernacular language usage are exceptional. The doctor's wife (D.W. for short) is neglected by her husband and full of long-standing resentments. She ends up in a lesbian bar. After a few drinks, a sexy black woman named Macalynn introduces herself. She knows D.W.'s story—bored housewife married to a doctor. Macalynn takes the doctor's wife to a bathroom stall; slowly she has her undress, gets behind her, and bends her over the toilet. To find out how this ends, read **Pillow Talk**. It's worth it.

Stephanie Rosenbaum's "Shine" is about the sexual initiation of a cute little baby dyke named Mink by Johnny, a big-breasted, butch Irish poker player. It turns nasty and humiliating pretty quickly, but the writing is a definite turn on.

> Then finally, finally, she puts her hand on me. . . . The tips of her fingers brush up and along my leg, following the line of my thigh to pause just before the triangle of dark silky hair. She turns her hand so her knuckles brush so lightly against me. Then, again, back and forth, soft as a handful of feathers. Her mouth is inches from mine, but she's not looking at me. My breath is coming choppy and faster, and every time she grazes my skin it's like a little electric shock. . . . Snap. Snap. I'm breathing so fast, the room is starting to go black and fuzzy at the edges, and finally I have to, I have to, and my voice tears out of the back of my throat, and I say, "Johnny, kiss me" and she does. (233)

My favorite story was "Good Girls" by Louise A. Blum. It is about secret lives and secretive behavior. Two closeted lesbians, Hannah and Cleo, are living in a country town. Hannah is a bank teller and Cleo is a mystery woman of Polish ancestry. Earlene, the beauty shop operator, labels Hannah a "good girl."

Blum writes mundane yet amusingly telling scenes. She is adept at evoking an erotic mood through her use of words. Each succeeding sex scene builds to a higher sexual crescendo:

> I part the lips of her vagina gently, then plunge the cucumber deep inside her till she moans. . . . Cleo puts her head back and screams, laughs, gasps. . . . I unlock the cuffs from her ankles: she wraps her legs around me, clutches me with her thighs, thin and damp and full of a strength that makes me catch my breath. I slip the cucumber in and out, reach up and undo the restraints on her wrists just as she comes, she seizes my shoulders with both hands, raises her body to mine and wraps herself around me, all naked, slippery flesh, rides it out till she shudders, exhausted, and falls back against the bed. (51-52)

Pillow Talk contains a plethora of themes that run the gamut from voyeurism to unadulterated passion to graphic, rough sex to get the reader aroused. Be it a story about an heiress who wears a suit of leather to give her strength and confidence or a woman who watches the sexual escapades of a seamstress and her models from afar, the collection of eroticism in **Pillow Talk** contains something for everyone. ❖❖❖

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Virgins without Voices

by Lisa Shapiro

Awakening The Virgin: True Tales of Seduction ed. by Nicole Foster. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1998, 334 pp., U.S. $12.95, U.K. L8.99,paper. ISBN 1-55583-456-6.

Recently at a writers' conference, I attended a panel wherein authors were discussing what they read for fun. My heart went out to one fellow who admitted that, engrossed in the throes of his own fiction, he reads only true crime stories. Sad but true describes the latest collection of true-to-life tales, **Awakening The Virgin,** edited by Nicole Foster. I have high expectations of virgins, probably because they figure so prominently in culture and mythology. From sacrificed maidens to Mary, who remains a Christian paradox of purity and maternal wisdom, virgins are not to be taken lightly. Symbolism encompasses the physical, such as youth, beauty and strength, and also the spiritual, when the virgin imparts a sense of renewal and transformation. Kathleen Norris describes a virginal sense of self as being "cognizant of oneself as valuable, unique, and undiminshable at core."[1] That is, virgin is a quality, and to be virgin is, perhaps, to exist in a state of grace. The Webster Comprehensive Dictionary defines a virgin as a person, especially a young woman, who has never had sexual intercourse, and it is this definition, enlightened by lesbian sensibilities to include women who have never had sex with another woman, which authors generally adhere to in Foster's collection. A few authors risk a bit more: first time in a threesome, first time in a dominant role, first experience of anal sex. Mostly, however, these are stories of sexual exploits as promised by the subtitle, "True Tales of Seduction." And therein lies the problem.

Except for the details of setting, these selections are so similar in plot—I saw her, I wanted her, I fucked her—as to be unrelievedly boring. Foster apparently never intended the collection to be anything but witness upon witness proclaiming her conquest. The thin excuse for an introduction merely expounds upon the table of contents, directing readers on a seek-and-find deflowering tour: in school, at camp, in a funeral home . . .

There are thirty stories in the collection, and roughly a third feature blond-haired, blue-eyed virgins. In only a handful of stories do the virgins speak for themselves; the majority of writers are describing firsthand accounts of making love to the uninitiated. This may be in keeping with Foster's intentions, but it adds an arrogant twist to the title, as a woman who must be awakened to her sexuality seemingly lacks the inner fortitude to discover her own sexual self. In this sense, virginity is merely a state of being to be dispensed with, not an innate quality that offers hope for continued renewal. In at least half of the stories, the narrator indicates that the virgin herself plays an active part in the seduction, which alludes to the posture of the mythical virgin, a woman possessed of irresistible allure and the power to tempt. Classically, it is the virgin who must be captured and subdued, her power absorbed. This tiresome plot unfolds in story after story, with the conquering moment erotically portrayed, as in this representative passage in Jane Sebastion's "Summertime":

> A throaty moan escaped her as I slowly slipped in my finger. Ridley began to buck and push against me. Deeper I pushed, licking faster and faster. Her breath came in pants and sobs; the hand holding mine gripped tighter. She let out a loud gasp and moan as she came, yelling my name. She lay still for a few minutes then sat up, pulling my face to hers. I looked into her blue, crying eyes. (200)

That these are true stories gives me pause. Writers are to be commended for risking the details of their lives and committing personal experiences to paper, and they may even rise above trite phrases and stiff descriptions by virtue of honest emotion. Unfortunately, in this collection, that rarely happens. It's as if Foster gathered her authors into a room and instructed, "Skip the feelings, go for the sex!" A few exceptions stand out, most notably in the stories where the narrator is herself a virgin, confessing more genuinely to the quaking sensation of fear. "Two Virgins," by Charlotte Cooper, is such a story, wherein the narrator sets up an S/M encounter in which she will top for the first time. Her anxiety is palpable, and she even leaves the scene at one point until her confidence returns. The story is both honest and transcendent, as the narrator learns that she is strong enough to defeat her fear. Cooper begins her story with this poignant introduction:

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> It feels strange writing this from the point of view of seducer. *Virgin* feels much more appropriate a label for me. . . . I feel as though my virginity is constantly being eroded by new sexual experiences.
>
> . . . I know my sexual horizons are wider than those of many people, yet I often lack confidence in what I do, and I wonder if I will ever stop feeling inexperienced, virginal. (208)

"Pretty Please," by Debbie Ann Wertheim, is another refreshing story told from the virgin's point of view, in this case a woman whose lover initiates her to anal sex. Unlike the simpler, two-dimensional cruise missile stories (lock on target and detonate an orgasm), Wertheim treats readers to real tension. She feels shy, scared, greedy. She talks about how long it takes, how many tries, even though she feels safe with her lover, before she can take delight in what she really wants. In only one story, "My Side of the Bed," by Veronica Holz, does the narrator admit that she wants nothing to do with a virgin and, when she finally ends up in bed with one, regrets it as soon as the consummation is completed. Loath to make a commitment, her passion drains away as soon as her bedmate declares, "I love you." Holz's unblinking humor adds a welcome change of pace.

Awakening The Virgin's basic weakness is that, in the majority of stories, the experience of virginity is reduced to conquest. The virgin's untried cunt is a prize, and what she offers in return, other than gratitude, goes unexplored. In their eagerness to describe the perfect seduction, many of the authors neglect other transformations, besides the sexual, that may be taking place. Foster's book would have us believe that virginity is an either/or experience—you are, and then you're not—the physicality of the virginal state being given primary importance. Singling out the physical doesn't do justice to the wealth of symbolism and folklore with which virgins are imbued—the qualities such as power and purity which make them, at the outset, so attractive. And, if these attributes are already innate within the virgin, then awakening must be a coming to know, a growing into strength, while at the same time virginal essence is retained at the core. The virgin not only wakes up, she comes to life, ready to act and engage, and it is this active quality which these stories largely ignore, settling for a more traditional, and passive, accounting.

Reading Foster's collection is like gazing at Sleeping Beauty, with Prince Charming pouncing again and again. The virgin doesn't have a chance to recount her dreams, or reflect on their meaning. Instead of tapping the virgin's inspiration, the stories gathered here barely tempt the imagination. And because the virgins have so little to say for themselves, their voices, and thus their full dimensions, are lost. ❖❖❖

[1] **Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith** by Kathleen Norris. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 75.

***Lisa Shapiro**, recently transplanted to Florida, is the author of **The Color of Winter** and **Sea to Shining Sea**, both published by Naiad.*

Earthquake!

by Pauline Klein

Love Shook My Heart ed. by Irene Zahava. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1998, 265 pp., U. S. $10.95, paper. ISBN 1-55583-404-3.

This collection of new lesbian love stories is wonderful. The variety displayed in the stories is very representative of lesbian lives. The stories range from tales of lust and full-blown passion to quiet stories of unrequited or unrecognized love. One very nice aspect is that not all the stories are about young, white lesbians. Several are about love when older, or young love looked at from the distance of old age.

Told as a fairy tale, "Becca and the Woman Prince" by Carolyn Gage is very fine. It had a poignancy reminiscent of that in the book **Patience and Sarah**. The feelings of difference and not fitting into a family and the expectations required of a daughter were very well expressed, yet in a way appropriate even for reading the tale to children.

"Wood" by Barbara Wilson spoke to my memories of my teen years and my curiousity about neighbor women who lived alone and my parents' warnings about becoming too friendly with these women. The narrator is a teen whose neighbor Trudy is a very solitary woman who is obviously grieving over someone. Despite her parents' warnings to stay out of her house, the teen reaches out to Trudy, who tells of a brother dead from AIDS and a lost lover, Lin. The teen is confused, yet she comes to realize the decency and humanity of Trudy, which is more important than her parents' warnings.

"Shelling Peas" by Merril Mushroom brought tears to my eyes. Told by an old woman to her grandchildren, it is the story of young lovers separated by parents who disapproved of their lesbianism. After many years they end up at a picnic together, one woman having lived as a lesbian for a long time, the other having finally accepted that she was meant to love women. They recognize each other, and their love, which had never died, is rekindled. As the last line of the story says, "Some things never change" (162).

Judith Stein's "Members of the Wedding" tells with humor and pathos the mixed feelings of a Jewish lesbian couple who come to the South for a family wedding. Demonstrating both the cultural and religious differences in humorous ways while at the same time identifying the pain and longing felt by many same-sex couples for the celebrations families throw for heterosexual couples is Stein's accomplishment. So few of us have families or even friends who give true validation to the sanctity and importance of our relationships.

There is not a bad story in this anthology. Some are longer, some are very short, yet all manage to make their point. The transitions they require of the reader are dramatic and keep you on your toes. After wallowing in wonderful, warm romance, you are suddenly in the middle of violent, passionate drama and then led into the happy reminiscence of old age remembering youth.

Highly recommended, these are stories to warm your heart by both veteran lesbian writers and a few newcomers. I look forward to reading more by all these excellent writers. ❖❖❖

***Pauline Klein** works at the Dekalb County Public Library, Decatur, GA.*

Good Bad Girls

by Ann Birnbaum

Lady Be Good: Erotic Love Stories by Naiad Press Authors ed. by Barbara Grier and Christine Cassidy. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1997, 288 pp., $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-56280-180-5.

In spring, when U.S. citizens must prepare tax returns, the opportunity to review **Lady Be Good**, a collection of twenty-three stories, was not unwelcome. While slogging through forms, schedules, and IRS instructions, I was relieved to turn now and then to the counterpoint of women longing, sighing, moaning, hungering, quivering, and shuddering.

Set in Australia, Ann O'Leary's "Waiting for the Rain" is the compact story of lovers of forty-five years and a bereaved lover's memory and carnal aching desire for her partner.

In the witty "Lay Lady Lay" by Laura Adams, a writer improvises on the challenges presented by usage of "lay" and "lie" while sitting at her computer lusting for a colleague and expressing annoyance with her ex-lover for taking her writer's guides.

Karin Kallmaker, in "Looking Out on the Morning Rain," writes musically of the yearning for color and light during the gray days of winter, and the sensuousness of a flash of brightness when it manifests itself, especially in an attractive woman.

Julia Watts's humorous "Girl Talk" is a provocative treatment of dyke protocol. A south Alabama mother privately tells her daughter's lover that she's known her daughter was a lesbian since she was "practically a toddler" (68). Nevertheless, the mother refuses to take the matter up with her daughter since "it's not my job to tell her. It's her job to tell me" (69).

This is an uneven collection. Some stories are trite, contrived, predictable and instantly forgotten. Others, however, linger well after reading. Most are love stories with happy endings. Yet several, including some of the best narratives, cannot be called "erotic" despite the subtitle's advertisement.

Be that as it may, if you filed for an extension on your tax return and find yourself drowning in stipulations regarding earned income credit, 28% rate gains and losses, or self-employed health insurance deductions, **Lady Be Good** might provide just the right diversion. ❖❖❖

***Ann Birnbaum** lives in Seattle, WA.*

Correction!

In Vol. IV, No. 4, we omitted a portion of Tatiana de la Tierra's review of Waiting in the Wings by Cherrie Moraga. The omitted sentence reads as follows: **"As all butches know, pussy comes with a price. And us femmes, we want our rights, our due respect, our sex, and all our bitchy whims attended to."** We apologize for the omission.

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